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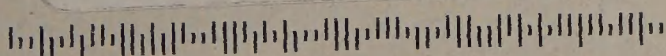
# THE Christian CENTURY

*Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully*

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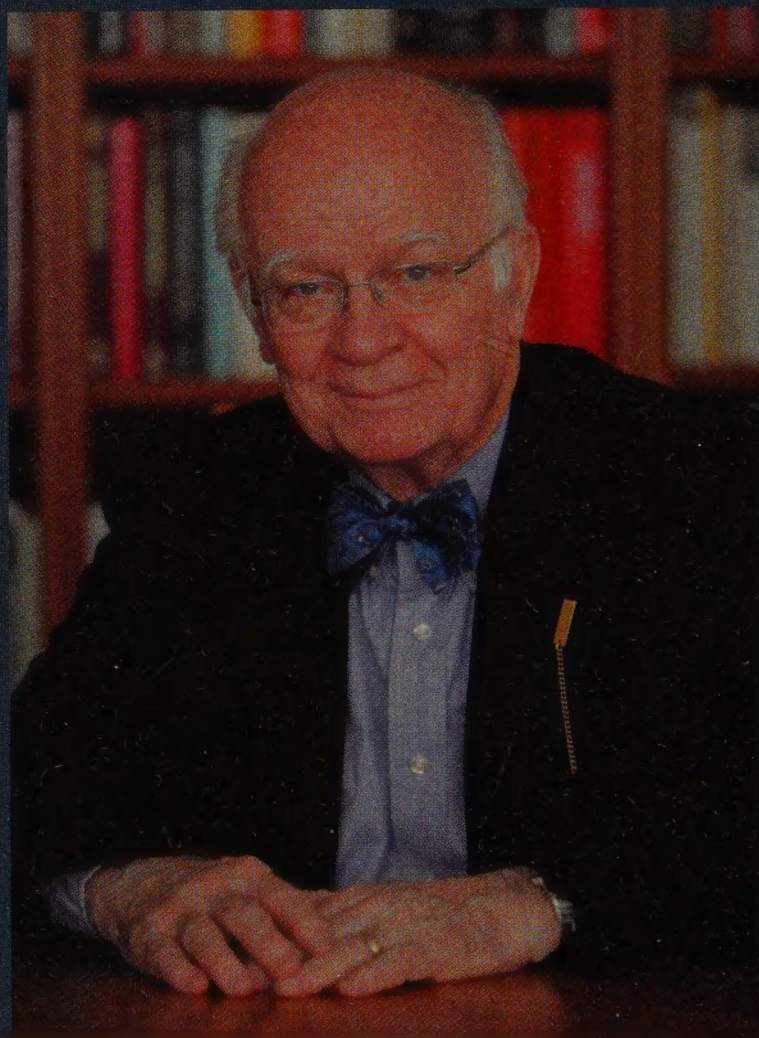




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“Ever since 1952 as a reader and 1956 as a contributor and an editor, I have looked forward to each new issue of the *CENTURY* to inform, stimulate and challenge me—as it has many thousands. To assure that generations to come can profit from this unique theological journal, I happily lend my name and support to the Legacy Circle and urge you to join me.”

—Martin E. Marty



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## Repenting for our prisons

AT THE HEART of what Christians believe there are two fundamental ideas: *imago Dei* and *metanoia*. If every human being bears the image of the Creator and is valued and loved by God, then human beings have social responsibilities to value one another. *Metanoia*, a Greek term often translated as “repentance,” means a complete turnaround, a change of heart and mind, a new way of thinking and being. Both ideas have huge implications for us individually, but also socially, politically, and economically.

Both concepts come into play when we decide that one of us needs to be incarcerated—removed from the community and held in secure confinement. While we give mental and verbal assent to these two Christian concepts, we do our actual living in the world very differently. This includes our decision making on issues like crime and punishment.

Two resources recently stirred up my thinking. One is Jeanne Bishop’s book, *Change of Heart* (see “The path of forgiveness,” April 15). Bishop questioned the justice of locking up her sister’s killer for life without parole, observing that it’s a Christian duty to make good on our promise to forgive as we have been forgiven. (See also Steve Thorngate’s article “Death without killing,” Aug. 19.)

Do heinous crimes negate those moral responsibilities? Most of us, I think, compromise in the interests of what we consider reality: some criminal acts are so evil that the perpetrator should be locked up for life without any hope of release. I have always been comfortable favoring life without parole instead of capital punishment.

But the criminal justice system in our country is broken. Our culture has resolved the debate about whether the purpose of incarceration is punishment or rehabilitation with a widespread and politically popular determination to get tough on crime. The result? The United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country in the world.

A second resource is a paper that my son Andrew wrote as part of his master’s degree work. In “Mass Incarceration as a Trap: Challenges to Re-entry for Released Inmates,” he

observes that mass incarceration has happened fairly quickly. In 1972, 161 people out of 100,000 were incarcerated in America. Then we declared war on drugs, and by 2007 the incarceration rate in our country had jumped to 767 out of 100,000.

Social science identifies several causes for this change: tougher sentencing, incarceration for minor drug offenses, and worsening conditions in inner cities. The mammoth loss of urban manufacturing jobs and resultant middle-class flight has left what one sociologist calls “pockets of severe and concentrated poverty.” At the same time, mass incarceration of African-American males has further disrupted inner city life.

The National Research Council says that the current criminal justice system advances social control at the expense of social justice. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander argues that the shift to more punitive measures is simply the latest phase in the control of African Americans and is fueled by a growing prison-industrial and criminal justice complex.

Imprisonment in this country is long on punishment and shamefully short on rehabilitation. Inmates are released from prison in Illinois with a pair of prison sweatpants, \$10, and a one-way bus ticket. Many have nowhere to go. They often slip easily into homelessness and crime and end up back in prison.

There are 2 million Americans in jail. Not many are receiving services that might be described as rehabilitative. The National Alliance for Mental Health estimates that 400,000 of those prisoners are dealing with significant mental health issues. Here in Chicago, Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, who oversees the massive Cook County Jail, says he thinks of the jail as the largest mental health facility in the country.

If there’s a bright side to this grim picture, it’s a growing bipartisan consensus that the system is both a moral failure and a fiscal disaster. Finally we are understanding that politicians who prey on fear and trumpet their promise to get tough on crime in order to get elected were not only wrong but have created a shameful national tragedy. We need political honesty and courage, which is to say, political *metanoia*.



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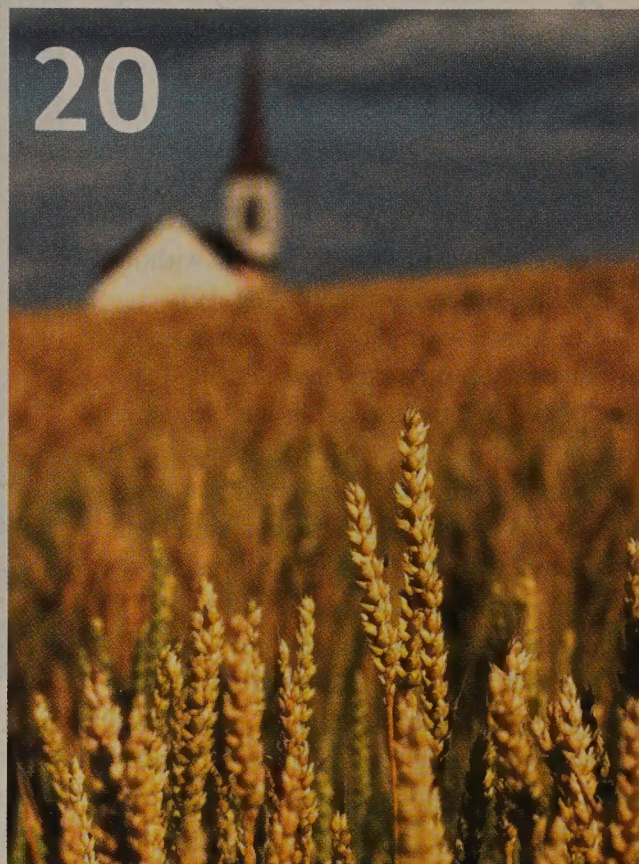
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# Death without parole

As someone who is actively seeking an end to the death penalty in Missouri, where we have been executing a person almost once a month, I am glad for any attention given to this issue and sympathetic to the notion that life without parole (LWOP) is in many cases “a hidden death sentence” (“Death without killing,” by Steve Thorngate, Aug. 19).

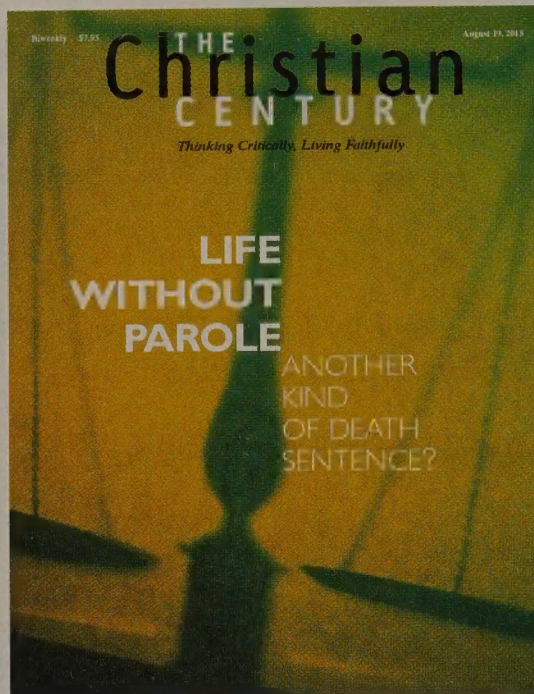
But I have several concerns. First, several persons recently executed here had stories of life in prison that showed transformation and acceptance—one living out a meaningful ministry, one providing legal services. A story from another state tells about renewing family relationships during LWOP. Perhaps LWOP ought not be thought of as if “one size [of misery] fits all.”

Second, I fear that some will fight the end of the death penalty if they think LWOP also might disappear—because they fear that guilty violent persons will be allowed on the streets. I hope I’m being paranoid, but some will use any excuse to perpetuate the use of vengeful violence. Nevertheless, I’m grateful for this article; it is not only about the convicted but also about who we are as a society.

*Jane Fisler Hoffman*  
Kansas City, Mo.

I was disappointed in Thorngate’s article. First, I saw no reference to the crimes that had resulted in LWOP. People don’t receive LWOP for petty crimes. No prison sentence is meant to make inmates feel good about their lives, so asking for their opinion on LWOP is beside the point. A fair discussion of the subject would require that one include all pertinent issues and talk with all the concerned parties.

Second, if LWOP is seen to be a form of death equal to or worse than an actual death sentence, then there has to be a reasonable alternative that does not mitigate the consequences of the crime. I saw nothing in the article that suggested such an alternative—just assertions about how inhumane LWOP is. If the crime is a murder, rape, or child molesta-



tion, how does one release a perpetrator prematurely without mitigating the associated consequences?

If rehabilitation is an objective, someone subject to LWOP can begin the rest of his or her life behind bars doing something worthwhile among fellow inmates. It has happened.

The CENTURY should make sure that its commentaries are thorough and complete. With subjects as sensitive as this, it is incumbent upon a serious publication to do it right.

*David E. Dax*  
Lexington, Va.

I have no expertise here, but I’ve had the kind of experience no one wants. Twenty years ago my elderly uncle was brutally beaten to death by a young man who had killed another elderly man the day before. Even though a young man exhibits a penchant for beating elderly men to death and expresses no remorse, I would not say he is beyond grace. And I would offer him spiritual, psychological, and other resources—opportunities to turn his life around. But being open to grace does not require opposing laws that provide the option for a life sentence without the possibility of parole. Indeed, it may take a lifetime for some to realize their need for grace.

There’s an important difference between executing another human being and protecting those who rely on civil government to protect them. I’m not saying that laws that make LWOP an option are always used well, but they provide an important and I believe ethical option to the death penalty. They do not kill the convict even if they severely limit the conditions of that individual’s life. There are cases where this is the best option, and I believe that my uncle’s murderer—serving two concurrent life sentences without the possibility of parole—is one of them. I hope he experiences grace and is one day sorry for what he did, but I would never want him to have the chance to re-offend.

*Michael McSherry*  
Northampton, Mass.

Humans have a fundamental right to hope. We should see to it that all prisoners—including those who can’t be released from prison—have a reasonable hope that their lives will in some way improve. As long as prisoners have this, death is not a good metaphor for their condition.

*George Desnoyers*  
Pittsfield, Mass.

## Talk about the end . . .

“Talk about the end” (editorial, Aug. 5) had some fine points, but the onus was put on the family to initiate the conversation. As a hospice chaplain, I observed that it was often the doctor who did not want to discuss hospice. Doctors are trained to “fix it”—so stopping treatment and placing the patient on hospice means the doctor has failed. I’ve seen too many families miss out on the supportive services of hospice until the patient’s very last days on earth. In the statement “Doctors won’t know what their patients want unless they discuss it,” they should refer to the doctors as well as the patients.

*Pacia Vamvas*  
Cobleskill, N.Y.



September 16, 2015

## What religious freedom isn't

**T**hese days social conservatives are all about religious freedom. As the wider culture has tacked left, the right has shifted to a rhetoric of conscientious objection. The free exercise of religion, once championed most prominently by minority faiths and their liberal defenders, has become a prime conservative talking point.

While some liberals are broadly dismissive of such arguments, we CENTURY editors are not. Religious freedom is a bedrock of American pluralism and its fertile religious soil. When religious rights conflict with others, such as the right of LGBTQ people not to face discrimination, finding a solution will not be easy. Competing rights must be balanced, which requires that we seek creative compromise. (See news story on p. 13.)

Yet some advocates of religious freedom seem to have something in mind besides free exercise for all. For example, some Christians trumpet religious freedom but seem uninterested in the rights of Muslims near Dallas who face fierce opposition to their plan to build a religious cemetery or in the rights of Apaches in Arizona who are fighting for a sacred site threatened by mining interests. When Christians decline to defend such groups, they betray their selective dedication to the religious freedom cause.

And other religious freedom appeals look suspiciously like pretexts. Duquesne University, a Catholic school in Pittsburgh, has been refusing to recognize a union that adjunct faculty voted to join in 2012. This summer the National Labor Relations Board ruled for the union. But Duquesne has appealed, maintaining that its religious mission exempts it from NLRB jurisdiction—and that its religious exercise requires the right to hire and fire in accordance with that mission, unencumbered by union rules. The university even took the chilling step of naming two individuals as examples of those it reserves the right to fire.

It's hard to miss the irony of a Catholic institution appealing to religious freedom to defend union busting; labor rights are deeply ingrained in the church's teaching and heritage. Duquesne president Charles Dougherty acknowledged this in a 2012 statement but maintained that "concerns for our religious mission are a higher priority." As a government entity, the NLRB rightly declines to pass judgment on the substance of that religious mission; its determination was based on other factors. Still, when an institution contradicts its own church's teaching in order to defend a mission that somehow excludes that teaching, it's not clear how religious freedom is served. What is clear is that religious freedom provides a convenient argument for fighting unions, something employers generally want to do anyway.

Religious freedom is the cause *du jour*, but often its rhetoric masks less noble concerns. That's a shame. The free exercise of religion is both a basic right and a source of American religious strength and diversity. Yet some religious freedom advocates seem eager to give it a bad name.

**Free exercise is important. Some appeals to it are suspicious.**



# CENTURY marks

**SACRIFICIAL LIFE:** A Yazidi teenage girl who escaped from ISIS has shed light on what life was like for American hostage Kayla Mueller, who was killed under suspicious circumstances. Mueller tried to shield four Yazidi girls who were also held captive and abused by the leader of ISIS. When the Yazidi girls had an opportunity to escape, Mueller refused to go with them because she was concerned that her Western appearance would jeopardize the others. In a letter given to French captives in 2014 but only revealed after her death, Mueller said she had “formed a bond of love and support” for the other hostages. “I am not breaking down and I will not give in no matter how long it takes” (CSMonitor.com, August 15).

**DASTARDLY DEEDS:** In August the Islamic State group destroyed a

monastery in central Syria that dates back more than 1,500 years, as well as a church inside the monastery that goes back to the fifth century. The monastery, which was sheltering Muslims and Christians fleeing from the civil war in Syria, was near a town where the extremists abducted dozens of Christians earlier in the month (AP).

**HAPPINESS IS:** Joining a religious group may do more to offer “sustained happiness” than other forms of social participation. Researchers in the Netherlands, analyzing 9,000 Europeans over age 50, looked at four areas: volunteering or working for a charity; taking educational courses; participating in a religious organization; and participating in political organizations. Taking part in a religious organization was the only one of the four that resulted in sus-

tained happiness. The researchers weren’t able to conclude whether the benefits came from the religious organizations themselves or from faith (*Washington Post*, August 14).

**THE BIG C AND FAITH:** Religious and spiritual beliefs can have a positive impact on cancer patients. The first of three studies indicated that cancer patients with greater levels of religion and spirituality showed better health and the ability to function better in life. A second study focused on the mental health of cancer patients and revealed that spiritual well-being correlated positively with less anxiety, stress, or depression. A third study looked at the social lives of cancer patients and concluded that those with stronger spiritual well-being and religious beliefs had a modest advantage in their social lives over those without belief (*International Business Times*, August 10).

**LAST WISH:** When Jimmy Carter announced that his cancer had gone to his brain, he stated one unselfish wish—that he would live to see the day the Guinea worm is eradicated. The very painful parasite was once a common malady in remote parts of Africa. Before the Carter Center began to work on this disease, there were 3.5 million cases annually; so far this year there have been only 11 (*Washington Post*, August 21).

**HIGHER ED TEST:** The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, the preeminent association in evangelical higher education, does advocate work on financial aid issues and coordinates a study abroad program for its members. While CCCU member institutions disagree on many doctrinal matters, they believe homosexuality is sinful. But in July, Virginia’s Eastern Mennonite University and Indiana’s Goshen

I'M SORRY SIR, BUT GLUTTONY IS A SIN  
AND IT WOULD COMPROMISE MY RELIGIOUS  
BELIEFS TO ENABLE YOUR SINFUL LIFESTYLE.





College announced that they would hire faculty who have married their same-sex partners. Tennessee's Union University announced it would withdraw from the council in protest. The council now faces a crucial choice: expel schools that affirm homosexuality or watch while some of its members bolt and form a new organization (RNS).

**STREET FIGHT:** In the city of New Orleans, 6,000 black males have been killed since 1980. Mitch Landrieu, the first white mayor of New Orleans since the 1970s, has vowed to find a way of stopping this killing through better education and job training and intervention programs for young males. "I don't understand why it's OK in America ... for us to leave so many of our citizens basically dead," says Landrieu, who won a majority of the votes of blacks in his recent reelection. "We have basically given up on our African-American boys" (*Atlantic*, September).

**OUTDOOR CHURCH:** The Pacific Northwest has some of the finest natural beauty in the country. It is also the region with the highest number of nones, people who claim no formal connection with religion. Is there a correlation? Researchers Todd W. Ferguson and Jeffrey A. Tamburello hypothesized that natural beauty impacts religious attendance negatively. They've shown that regions in the country with the most natural beauty and the best weather have the lowest church attendance—as much as a 31.5 percent difference between some counties. Natural beauty doesn't just compete with organized religion for people's time; it also competes for their allegiance as an alternative connection with the sacred (*Sociology of Religion*, Summer 2015).

**HOTTEST MONTH:** July was the hottest month ever recorded globally, with both land and sea averages factored in. The average global temperature was 1.46 degrees Fahrenheit above the 20th-century average. It surpassed the previous record set in 1998 by 0.14 degrees F. The year-to-date average temperature of land surface alone for 2015 was 2.41 degrees above the 20th-century average (*ScienceDaily*, August 20).

**“Now I feel it's in the hands of God, whom I worship, and I'll be prepared for anything that comes.”**

— Jimmy Carter, in a press conference announcing his cancer had spread to his brain (*Baptist News Global*, August 20)

**“Let us be clear: there is no credible alternative were Congress to prevent U.S. participation in the nuclear deal. If we walk away, we walk away alone. The world's leading powers worked together effectively because of U.S. leadership. To turn our back on this accomplishment would be an abdication of the United States' unique role and responsibility, incurring justified dismay among our allies and friends. We would lose all leverage over Iran's nuclear activities.”**

— Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to presidents Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush, in support of the Iran nuclear deal (*Washington Post*, August 21)

**SOCIAL INVESTING:** S&P Dow Jones Indices introduced a new SP 500 Catholic Values Index designed to follow the 2003 Socially Responsible Investment Guidelines from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The index, which includes about 90 percent of S&P 500 companies, screens out those tied to pornography, stem cell research, weapons production, military sales and child labor, as well as other unsustainable practices (AFP).

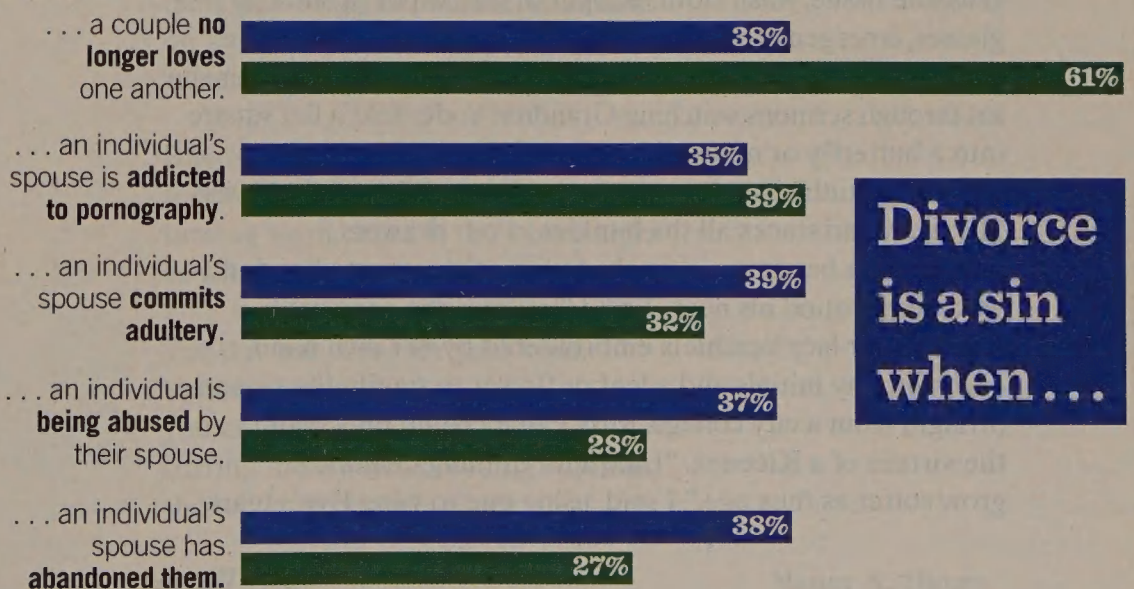
**NATURE OR NURTURE?** Researchers at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital

claim that trauma experienced by Holocaust survivors can be genetically passed on to their offspring. The genes of 32 Jewish men and women who had spent time in a Nazi camp or witnessed or experienced torture, as well as their children's genes, were examined and compared to those of Jews who had lived outside of Europe during the war. The gene changes in the children whose parents had experienced Holocaust-related trauma “could only be attributed to Holocaust exposure in the parents,” the major researcher concluded (*Guardian*, August 21).

## DIVORCE DIVIDE

SOURCE: LIFEWAY RESEARCH

**Among Americans  
Among Protestant pastors**



**Divorce  
is a sin  
when...**



# Illness as hermitage

by Janice Jean Springer

SINCE I RECEIVED the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, I have had to slow down and simplify my life to accommodate my compromised energy. At the same time, new obligations—medical appointments, attention to diet, increased exercise—demand more of that energy I no longer have.

I am required to keep a stringent daily schedule. *Finish breakfast at least an hour before the 7 a.m. meds. Practice yoga, but wait until two hours after a meal. Take the yellow pill three times a day, but keep four hours between it and the gray pill. Finish lunch an hour before the 1 p.m. meds. Take this at 4. Do that at 5. Remember this at 7. . . . Oh, and don't be stressed.*

There have been many losses. My self-

image as a strong and vibrant woman seems not to fit anymore. I have to pay attention to my balance, think about how I walk, be careful not to fall. *Be careful not to fall? When have I ever worried about falling?* I have always acted and felt younger than my years. How did I get to be old so young?

I've lost my safety net. I have benefited from the healing powers of Western medicine as well as acupuncture, prayer, yoga, homeopathy, ayurvedic medicine, and healthy foods. But if these are not going to preserve my health, what will keep me safe?

I've lost my spiritual grounding. I can't pray the way I always have. I spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on my body, and there isn't much time

left to focus on my spirit. When did I switch from being centered on God to being centered on myself?

I've lost my trust. I can no longer trust my body to do what I want it to do. I've lost the carefree confidence that my brain will always perform as it always has. I feel betrayed by those practices of diet and prayer in which I had put so much trust.

Perhaps the most painful loss of all: I've lost my illusions. I've lost the illusion that I am exempt from the losses and limits that besiege other people. I've lost the illusion that I am in control. I've lost the illusion that if I just do it all right, it will be all right.

At some point in life, whether because of illness, accident, injury, or aging, each of us will experience losses and limitations that invite us to wrestle with the question, how can I be faithful in my new circumstances? A spiritual director suggested to me that the challenges and changes I faced were giving my life a more contemplative shape, a deeper monastic spirit.

In an attempt to feel some control over my new routine, I made a list of what I was supposed to do and when I was supposed to do it. One day, as I looked at this schedule, I saw that it is not unlike the monastic practice of praying the hours, marking the day with eight times of prayer. I inserted the Latin names of the hours of prayer into my daily routine of pills and naps and exercises. Now, each time I check the schedule I'm reminded that my day is permeated with prayer.

Slowly, I began to experience a shift. Instead of fighting the changes and limits, I've begun to embrace them as a choice I am making in order to live faith-

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## The farm wife hoists the family flag

Eve got off the bus in tears the day her third grade teacher scolded her for using a hankie. "It's not sanitary," she said. Miss Pauley had no notion of what a handkerchief means to us: reusable tissue, wash cloth, gripper of lids, wiper of smudgy glasses, emergency bandage, keepsake we carry to the grave. Peekaboo with a hankie triggered Eve's first laugh, and later she sat through sermons watching Grandma Yoder fold a flat square into a butterfly or mouse. Now Eve does that for her sister and knots Ruth's Sunday pennies in a corner like a hobo's sack. She irons and stacks all the hankies in our drawers and brings a bandanna drenched with cold water to her dad who ties it round his neck. Last Christmas she gave me a set of four lacy kerchiefs embroidered by her own hand, each with my initials and a leaf or flower to signify the season. Straight from a city college, Miss Pauley could only count the virtues of a Kleenex. "Like a lot of things, hankies grow softer as they age," I said, using one to wipe Eve's tears.

Shari Wagner



fully, somewhat like a monk in the world. Instead of fighting Parkinson's so I can have time for my spiritual practice, it has become my spiritual practice. Parkinson's is the hermitage where I slow down, pay attention, and concentrate on what is needful in the moment.

As I focused on my body in a new way, the phrase *body prayer* kept coming to

Another practice I engage in is fasting. As best I can, I fast both from unhealthy foods and from the negativity that surrounds Parkinson's: my own fears, other people's horror stories, and the media's gloom-and-doom attitudes.

The practice of gratitude is easy, most days. I offer the Spirit my thanks, not for this illness, but for the gifts the illness has

really want, like discouragement, vulnerability, and fear. This practice is important to me because of our tendency in times of illness or injury to see our body and our emotions as enemies that we need to fight and conquer.

Some days I don't care one bit about praying the hours or learning what this illness has to teach me. There are times when my idea of fasting means denying myself everything other than Ben and Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk ice cream. But most of the time, this reframing deepens my spiritual life and allows me to experience the abundant love and grace of a good God. I no longer have the sense of being a victim.

I don't know what the future will bring, but then, I have never known that, even if I pretended that I did. I'm not sure if I'll always be capable of finding the peace I've found at this point. For now, my work is to receive whatever each day brings. My limited self and the limitless God come together to empower me to walk a path I never expected to walk and to walk it most days with gratitude. CC

## I practice forgiving myself for my times of discouragement and despair.

mind. I started to redefine spiritual practices in ways that served my new circumstances. For instance, I sometimes need to sit down and rest a few minutes between tasks, and most days I take a nap. I reframe these breaks as sabbath times.

**F**orgiveness is a spiritual discipline, and compassion, too, and I realized it is not just people I need to forgive. I practice forgiving my body for getting sick and growing old, and forgiving myself for my times of discouragement or despair. I try to practice compassion toward each part of my body that isn't working quite right, compassion toward myself for not being perfect.

My usual styles of prayer haven't been working anymore. Restless leg syndrome, which can sometimes accompany Parkinson's, frequently makes me unable to sit still for 20 minutes (or even five) of prayerful meditation, as I have done for more than 30 years. So I focus on my love relationship with the holy instead of on prayer styles or techniques. I pray the Jesus Prayer as I walk. I make yoga sessions a body prayer. I repeat a sacred mantra as I wash dishes. I pray without judging how I'm praying. And because my life now holds a lot of obligations and a good share of frustration, I pray in whatever way is pleasing to me each day, so that prayer is not just another demand on my to-do list, but something I anticipate with delight, a date with my Beloved.

brought me. Gratitude helps me to focus not on what is lost, but on what is left.

Surrender is a vital and particularly difficult spiritual discipline. I have always tried to surrender to the Spirit. Now I make a conscious effort to surrender to Parkinson's, to changes that I don't want. I am learning to surrender to how I am instead of clutching at how I wish I were or how I used to be.

I am learning to extend hospitality toward my body, even with its difficult changes, and toward the feelings I don't

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## Laywoman

Were you a man and single, the Jesuits  
would have you in a trice.  
But you are some man's wife, lovely,  
hair coarse and wild as a Morgan's tail,  
on each hip a fine son and one on your shoulders.

Your bent for theology is more startling  
than your renegade humor, your ease  
on a good horse, fast and wild  
as he can be. You are no cut-out saint.

Bus-stop apologist, training your eye  
for truth at your kitchen table,  
turning worn pages in the weary night  
as your tea grows cold,

The day has come for your kind.  
Venerable Jenn,  
you are better than you know,  
stirring the oatmeal, reading Aquinas,  
shoveling the snow.

Nancy A. Henry

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Janice Jean Springer, author of *Nurturing Spiritual Depth in Christian Worship: Ten Practices*, serves United Church of Christ congregations in Missoula, Montana, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



## Schools engage three faiths in Israel

**F**our decades ago, the YMCA in Jerusalem opened a “peace pre-school” that brought Arab and Jewish children into shared classrooms. Then as now, schools in Israel were strictly divided by language (Arabic or Hebrew) and hence also by religion—Christians and Muslims in Arabic schools, Jews in Hebrew schools. About 15 years ago, some parents at the Y pre-school decided they wanted their children’s experience of bilingual, multicultural education to continue beyond the age of five.

That’s the origin of Hand in Hand (Yad b’Yad), a network of six schools in different parts of Israel where Jews, Muslims, and Christians study together and learn each other’s language, tradition, and political views. The school began by opening a first-grade classroom and added a grade each year thereafter. The first Hand in Hand students graduated from high school in 2011.

Hand in Hand schools remain rare outposts of intense engagement between Jews and Palestinians with the goal of building a shared society.

But not everyone is enthused about that project. In June, the Hand in Hand school in Jerusalem was vandalized with anti-Arab graffiti, and in November a classroom was firebombed. The community has not been intimidated, however. After the most recent incident, students covered the graffiti with signs that said “Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies.”

Each Hand in Hand classroom has two teachers, one speaking Arabic, one speaking Hebrew. Students hear both languages and learn about each other’s religion. Noa Yammer, communications director for Hand in Hand, said religious holidays provide a natural occasion for teaching children about the three religions.

More challenging for teachers, said Yammer, is the question of how to mark national holidays, especially Israel’s Independence Day and Israel’s Memorial Day. Those two days, which follow one another on the calendar, evoke the starkly different histories of Jews and Palestinians. The day that Jews celebrate a triumph of nationhood marks, for Palestinians, the Nakba, the disaster of 1948, when family members were killed or sent into exile by Israeli forces. Whereas Israeli Jews mourn their fallen soldiers as heroes, Palestinians see Israeli soldiers as the people who killed their grandfathers, fathers, and brothers and who now enforce the Israeli occupation of the land.

For teachers and parents, planning how to mark such a holiday takes hours of reflection and conversation, Yammer said. This past year, the community

decided to hold separate ceremonies for Jewish children and Arab children so as to acknowledge the meaning of the day for each community. But the two groups came together afterward for a longer, shared assembly at which parents from both sides spoke about their experiences of suffering and their hopes for the future. Students sang songs about peace in Arabic and Hebrew, said Yammer, and displayed art they’d created.

“It’s a tough day,” Yammer acknowledged, but “stepping into shared living is what we need to do if we want the violence to end.”

The Gaza War last summer presented another challenge to Hand in Hand communities. It was a time when people wanted to be among their compatriots, but also a time when it was especially important to come together as a school community, Yammer said. People needed



**INTERFAITH TEACHING:** Two teachers—one Jewish, one Palestinian—instruct pupils in a classroom at a school in the Hand in Hand (Yad b’Yad) network in Israel, where Jews, Muslims, and Christians learn each other’s language, traditions, and political views.

PHOTO BY EMIL SALMAN



a place “that was about listening, a place for people to say what they were feeling.”

The Hand in Hand community in Jerusalem ended up creating T-shirts with the words “Marching together,” which they wore as they walked together through Jewish and Arab neighborhoods. They didn’t carry any political signs about the war. They simply wanted to “claim public space” and witness to the possibility of a shared society.

When the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems hopeless, Yammer said, the work of Hand in Hand gives her hope. “It’s not about ‘maybe one day’; it’s about children and families now.” —David Heim, CHRISTIAN CENTURY

## A search for compromise as county clerks stop same-sex marriages

As a number of county clerks in Kentucky, Texas, Alabama, and other states resist issuing marriage licenses for same-sex couples, some longtime advocates for marriage equality say it may be time to compromise.

Two months after the Supreme Court’s landmark ruling made same-sex marriage a constitutional right, for many religious conservatives the cultural battle now turns toward whether those with deeply held religious beliefs, including public officials, should be compelled to participate in public duties that are anathema to their faiths.

Kim Davis, clerk of Kentucky’s Rowan County, has refused to issue any marriage licenses since June, defying the Supreme Court and an order from the state’s governor Steve Beshear. In mid-August U.S. District judge David Bunning ruled that she must begin issuing licenses to gay and lesbian couples. However, Bunning stayed his ruling, noting “emotions are running high on both sides of this debate” and giving Davis time to bring her First Amendment claims to the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

[The *USA Today* Network reported that Bunning “also found that marriage

forms do not constitute an endorsement; instead, a clerk simply certifies that information is accurate and that couples are qualified to marry under state law. Davis is among a number of clerks in Kentucky who have cited concerns over issuing licenses, and Bunning argues that siding with Davis would allow other clerks to follow her approach, in what could become a ‘substantial interference’ in half of the state.”]

Davis has also refused to allow any willing underlings to file same-sex marriage licenses, arguing that even this would compromise her religious beliefs. Most legal experts doubt she has much of a constitutional case to forgo her public duties as a matter of religious conscience, but even those who reject her legal claims see reasons for U.S. society to come to an agreement with those who have religious objections to same-sex marriage.

“The winners of this constitutional marriage equality business are not well advised to push our advantage too harshly or severely,” said William Eskridge, a professor at Yale Law School who has advocated for same-sex marriage for 25 years.

“We would be better advised to work gently and constructively with the public officials to work out arrangements so that legitimate couples seeking legitimate marriage licenses can still be served,” while attempting to “somehow accommodate the religious views of some of the clerks and administrators.”

The clashes have fostered a measure of resentment among some conservatives and raised questions about the nature and scope of religious liberty within the public sphere.

“If you get people of goodwill and good faith on both sides to sit down and talk, you end up coming out a lot happier,” said Mark Goldfeder, senior fellow at the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University in Atlanta, who has helped craft the state’s religious freedom restoration acts. “It’s good for both religious observers and for civil peace for us to shape our laws in ways that let people live in ways that are consistent with their heartfelt obligations, so long as we can find a way to make sure everyone is accommodated.”

A number of counties in Alabama continue to refuse to issue marriage licenses for religious reasons. Alabama state senator Greg Albritton has proposed legislation that would end state-issued marriage licenses in Alabama altogether, leaving all couples to enter marriage contracts on their own and then simply file them with probate judges.

After the Supreme Court decision, Katie Lang, clerk of Hood County, Texas, wrote that “the religious doctrines to which I adhere compel me to personally refrain from issuing same-sex marriage licenses.” Later, her office said it would provide staff to process same-sex marriage licenses. In August, the county settled a lawsuit from a gay couple who had initially been denied a license, paying nearly \$44,000 in damages.

“We’ve had a very fast social change on the question of marriage,” said Robin Fretwell Wilson, professor of law at the University of Illinois. “So we should want to have consideration for people who have been in these jobs for a long time, for whom their religious convictions might otherwise lead them to quit or be fired.”

Yet Wilson does not believe that a state clerk’s office or individual worker can legally create a “choke point” for a couple with a constitutional right to get married.

Some states have already done this, however. Delaware, which recognized same-sex marriage in 2013, allows judges and other officials to refuse to participate in same-sex marriages. And in June, the North Carolina legislature overrode Governor Pat McCrory’s veto of a bill that would allow some register of deeds workers and magistrates to refuse to solemnize civil marriages if they hold a “sincerely held religious objection.” However, if they do, they will not be able to participate in any marriage, heterosexual or same-sex, for six months.

Earlier this year religious conservatives and gay rights advocates in Utah agreed to a compromise after a federal court ordered the state to start issuing same-sex marriage licenses.

Utah carved out a legal space for county clerks with religious objections to opt out of solemnizing same-sex mar-



riages. But state law also now requires each county to make a willing substitute available for all couples during all business hours, so no one would be turned away.

Utah also added legal protections for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to its civil rights laws. The federal government and 31 other states do not include such protections.

“When Utah was in the same boat as the rest of the country is in now, and they had a marriage decision that they didn’t agree to . . . what they said is, we’re going to step up and create a duty, so that everybody who presents for a marriage license in Utah gets one, period,” said Wilson, who advised the Utah legislature in the compromise. “But they also said we’re going to outsource that duty to anybody in the community who is authorized to be a celebrant—like mayors, judges, clergy, whoever—and we’re going to create a process that protects objectors before the fact, before anyone shows up and is told no.” —Harry Bruinius, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## Muslim leaders issue call to act on climate change

Muslim leaders and scholars from 20 countries made a joint declaration at a conference in Istanbul, calling on Muslims and all nations worldwide to address climate change.

“Our species, though selected to be a caretaker or steward (*khalifah*) on the earth, has been the cause of such corruption and devastation on it,” the August 18 statement says.

Supporters of the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change included the grand muftis (the highest authorities in religious law) of Uganda and Lebanon and government representatives from Turkey and Morocco. The conference itself, the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium, was cosponsored by Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, and GreenFaith.

The declaration came in the wake of President Obama’s announcement of a



**FUEL NEEDS:** Aisha, 11, carries coal to be used for cooking and heating from a brick-making factory in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. A group of Muslim leaders released a declaration urging the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims to address climate change causes, including fossil fuel use.

Clean Power Plan in early August, which requires states to reduce carbon emissions from coal power plants starting in 2017.

The declaration is also a precursor to the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Paris this December. Among other things, it puts pressure on those attending the UN conference to set clear goals, calls on wealthy and oil-producing nations to be leaders in curbing greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, and asks that all nations commit to 100 percent renewable energy or a zero emissions strategy.

The statement also quotes Islamic texts, suggesting a religious imperative to care for the environment and calling on the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims to play an active role in these efforts.

“We call on all groups to join us in collaboration, cooperation and friendly competition in this endeavor and we welcome the significant contributions taken by other faiths, as we can all be winners in this race,” the statement said. “If we each offer the best of our respective traditions, we may yet see a way through our difficulties.”

Critics pointed out that some of the biggest Islamic nations have not taken an active part in supporting the call. Fazlun Khalid, who was involved in drafting the declaration, noted that Islam has a different structure from other faith traditions, with “no Islamic pope.”

“People need to be told and politi-

cians need to stop misleading their people, in telling them they can go on increasing their standards of living for ever and ever and ever,” Khalid told the BBC. —Sara Weissman, Religion News Service; Denise Hassanzade, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## ISIS recruiters cause concern in Kurdish town in Turkey

White-on-black Islamic calligraphy still adorns the establishment that the self-described Islamic State used to recruit fighters and bombers in Adiyaman, a town in southeast Turkey.

Known as the Islamic Tea House, it was a hub for bearded men in tunics who lured young men for explosives training in Syria before complaints from the community led police to shut it down.

“It wasn’t exactly a tea house, but they did drink tea,” said Mahmoud Tunc, a boy with a whisper of a mustache who works at a tea shop across the street. “They were a carbon copy of the IS guys you see on social media. Even if you put a Qur’an in front of them, they wouldn’t read it. They would just parrot their stupid ideology. They were not harmful to us, but they were very harmful to Adiyaman and Islam.”



Adiyaman is still reeling from the notoriety of two of its sons. One was Orhan Gonder, the suspect in twin bombings that killed four people at a June election rally in Diyarbakir, unofficial capital of Turkey's Kurdish region. The other was the suicide bomber behind the July 20 attack in Suruc, a way station for anti-IS Kurdish activists, that claimed 32 lives and rent Turkey into a bellicose tailspin against both IS and Kurdish militants.

Conservative Muslim Kurds are in the majority here. In contrast to Diyarbakir, Adiyaman supports Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. But the two incidents have sparked soul-searching in a time of unrest in Turkey.

Gonder reportedly has protested his innocence from behind bars. His uncle said the extroverted young man, who cracked jokes at weddings, is a victim of manipulation. He and others say these attacks were preventable if authorities had heeded the warnings of parents whose radicalized sons had traveled to Syria.

"We think he was brainwashed," said Ercan Gonder, the boy's uncle. "We think IS was involved, but we don't believe there is just one hand at play."

When Gonder disappeared in October 2014, his family knew something was amiss. The young man had grown a beard and began to pray five times a day, a tradition normal for Sunni Muslims, but not for his parents, who are Alevis. [Like the Alawites in Syria, Alevis share key beliefs with the largest

branch of Shi'a Islam. They also share some traditions with Sufis.]

The family was uneasy about the time he spent at the Islamic Tea House and with books extolling Afghan and Chechen warriors. They became alarmed when they learned that 15 of his friends had traveled to Syria. They decided to inform the police.

Before Gonder disappeared, a police officer met with him, but only took his statement. Ercan Gonder described the family's appeal to authorities and search efforts as largely futile.

Many here suspect that Turkish intelligence is complicit in Islamist militant activity, including the flow of foreign fighters to Syria. In 2012–2014, Adiyaman was a recruitment and fund-raising center for Syrian rebels, primarily via a stand near the municipality bearing the banner of the Free Syrian Army. Over this period, moderate rebels gave way to hard-line groups such as al-Qaeda and IS, fueling suspicions that the FSA was a screen for militants.

Adiyaman residents pride themselves on their religious diversity: Syriac Christians, Armenians, and Alevis live alongside Muslims from the major branches of Islam. Yet Adiyaman has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. While much of the older generation worked in the tobacco industry, urbanization has left the new generation without jobs.

"There is nothing for young people in the city—no pubs, no clubs, no entertainment, only cafes where you can play tawula," or Turkish backgammon, said Ozgur Sever, a native of Adiyaman who moved to Istanbul to study. "Since they have no entertainment or cultural activities, they are open to ideological radicalization."

Hidayet Aktoprak, a conservative Muslim who runs the local branch of Mazlumder, a rights organization, is not convinced that IS recruitment represents a widespread phenomenon among youth. By his calculation, at least 127 Adiyaman natives have traveled to Syria. "The [real] number is estimated to be 400, because many went to Syria as a family, leaving no one behind to report them missing," he said.

The fact that there are Kurds in IS ranks in Syria battling Kurds backed by a U.S.-led coalition also creates tension.

Osman Suzen of Insan Haklari Dernegi, another rights association, is based in Adiyaman. He believes that IS recruitment is underreported.

"Most of the families are scared and hide it," he said. "Some think that no measures will be taken. Others are satisfied as they received money."

Many here claim that IS recruits receive \$5,000 upon joining and a stipend of \$2,000 thereafter.

Analysts say that IS recruitment efforts in Turkey often have a "personal touch." Unlike in the West, where social media is highly influential, friendships and face-to-face relationships play a crucial role here.

Ayse Gul, cochairwoman of Egitim Sen, a pro-Kurdish and leftist teachers union, pins blame on government policies that favor religious education over more secular schooling.

"Most families in Adiyaman are conservative and want their children to have a religious education," she said. "They see it as an opportunity, but in reality it leaves their children vulnerable to IS and other radical ideologies." —Dominique Soguel, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## Germany's classrooms make a place for Islam

Timur Kumlu had just read the second-graders a chapter from the Qur'an about Abraham looking for Allah but finding him neither in the sun, the wind, nor the moon.

Who is Abraham? One boy with piercing dark eyes jumped in. "He trusted Allah!"

Good, and who is Allah? "God," answered a pale-faced Albanian boy. Almost half the pupils at the school in Frankfurt are Muslim, their parents coming from Afghanistan and Iraq, Syria and Albania, Turkey and Morocco.

Kumlu nodded. Allah, he said, is also the God of the Jews and Christians.

"All of us have common roots," he said. "Jews, Christians, Muslims."

Germany, like the rest of Europe, tries to engage with its growing Muslim community and weed out radicalism, but it is

PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE SOGUEL



**CONCERN FOR YOUTH:** Complaints from neighbors led police to shut down an IS recruitment center in the southeastern town of Adiyaman, Turkey. It is now a paint shop, but the group's banner still decorated the storefront on August 8.





**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION:** A Muslim woman fills out an application for a German residence permit in 2010 in Berlin. As more Muslim immigrants to Germany raise children in the country, the nation is adapting to teach Islam in public schools as it does other religions.

doing it in a unique way. The government in recent years has taken steps to put Islam on the same legal footing as Christianity and Judaism by extending constitutional protections. The faith is being incorporated into public school lesson plans and university disciplines.

“Most of the kids here live in two cultures, and they don’t know where they belong,” said Kumlu, who has been going through new, state-certified training to teach Islam. “By giving kids a basis on their religion, we can help them not to fall prey to radical discourse.”

The German state sees religions as partners in keeping democracy stable, and it supports religious groups in multiple ways.

“There is an openness toward religions, not only religions as having their own merits, but as contributing to the well-being of society,” said Mathias Rohe, head of the Center for Islam and the Law in Europe at the University of Erlangen.

Legal experts anchored religious instruction in Germany’s constitutional Basic Law in a response to the abuses of the Third Reich. But for a long time that applied only to Christians and Jews. German lawmakers assumed that Muslim guest workers, brought in from Turkey and other countries, would eventually return home. But they stayed, and their numbers grew: some 4 million Muslims live in Germany, making Islam the country’s fastest-growing religion.

Wolfgang Schaüble, while interior minister in Angela Merkel’s administration, first called for Islam to be taught in schools after declaring publicly that “Islam is part of Germany” in 2005. Later the German Council of Science and Humanities, an advisory body to the government, recommended that Islam be part of universities, too, so that imams and teachers of Islam could be trained in the German language as Christian and Jewish theologians are. Most of the imams at Germany’s roughly 2,800 mosques are from Turkey.

A 20 million euro government initiative led to the creation of four Islam theology centers at some of Germany’s public universities. “Being part and parcel of a world-famous university” means that “Islam no longer stands on the outside,” said Omar Hamdan, who heads the Islam center at Tübingen University. Similar centers also exist at the universities of Osnabrück, Nürnberg, and Frankfurt. “We stand on equal footing with the other theology schools.”

The centers’ graduates are expected to work in local mosques or as social workers, with many more as public school teachers. So far only 4 percent of the country’s estimated 700,000 Muslim pupils receive religious instruction.

German officials are alarmed by the way young, charismatic, German-speaking preachers with little religious background lure young people into jihadism.

“We don’t want men like them taking

the Qur’an out of our hands,” said Harry Harun Behr of Frankfurt University, who’s responsible for the training of future teachers of Islam in middle and high schools in Hessen. “When radical preachers appear somewhere on the marketplace, my students go there and will argue with these people, mingle with the crowd, and discuss their arguments against radical Islam.”

The key, he said, is for students to learn how to think critically about the Qur’an and Islam.

“We are on the brink of having young Islam scholars ready to get their doctoral [degrees] and be anchors in the public to answer the tricky questions of Islam,” Behr said.

With an Islam theology degree from Frankfurt University, Hakan Celik now assists the imam at his local mosque and works in a deradicalization program.

“How can Turkish-speaking imams show the Muslims who live here how to live?” asked Celik, who once wanted to study in Egypt or Saudi Arabia. “We have to give those kids religion in the German language so they can have a platform to talk about their problems. If we don’t offer it to them, somebody else will.”

In parts of Germany with fewer or no Muslims—in the former East, for example—Islam lessons aren’t offered in schools. In contrast, the state of Lower Saxony and the city-states of Hamburg and Bremen have signed agreements with Muslim groups that regulate how Islam is taught in schools and which days Muslims are entitled to take off, as well as the rights of Muslims to minister in prisons, hospitals, and other public institutions.

It remains unclear how state-taught Islam will be seen by the broader Muslim community. But some say that at least Germany is dealing with Islam out in the open. In France, with its strict separation of religion and state, “a lot is happening in dark fields that nobody has control over,” said Michael Kiefer, an Islamic theologian at the University of Osnabrück. “In Germany, religious organizations have to cooperate with the state, and that cooperation comes with obligation and regulations. . . . That has a moderating impact.” —Isabelle de Pommereau, *The Christian Science Monitor*



## People



■ **Jonathan Myrick Daniels** was 26 when he stepped in front of a shotgun blast meant for a fellow civil rights worker, Ruby Sales, 50 years ago in Hayneville, Alabama.

That act, and Daniels's summer of activism in Alabama, led the Episcopal Church to recognize him as a saint in 1991. An annual pilgrimage to Lowndes County is held in his honor.

Soon an eight-inch-high limestone carving of Daniels will be ready for viewing at the Human Rights Porch at the Washington National Cathedral, putting Daniels in the company of Mother Teresa and Rosa Parks.

Daniels was chosen in part because of his relative obscurity. "It was a deliberate choice to find somebody within our own ranks that we could lift up and memorialize," said Kevin Eckstrom, National Cathedral spokesman.

Daniels, originally from New Hampshire, was a student at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when he and several of his classmates answered Martin Luther King Jr.'s call for clergy to help finish the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama in 1965, two days after state troopers beat marchers in what became known as Bloody Sunday.

Daniels stayed for most of the summer, living with the family of Alice and Lonzy West (two of the family's children appear in the photo above). He was with a group of activists arrested for protesting whites-only policies at stores. After a week in jail, on August 20, 1965, he and the others were released. They walked to a nearby store, where an armed segregationist, Tom Coleman, confronted them. Daniels moved Sales out of the way, and Coleman shot him.

The Episcopal Diocese of Alabama sponsored events August 14–16 honoring Daniels and other civil rights martyrs,

including a pilgrimage from the jail to the site of the store where Daniels was shot. Michael Curry, presiding bishop-elect of the Episcopal Church, was among 28 Episcopal bishops who took part in the liturgy and walk, which drew 1,500 people, Episcopal News Service reported.

"We are not here because we think good thoughts, or simply because we are nice people," Curry said in his sermon, according to ENS. "We are here because we who have been baptized—we're not simply baptized into church membership—we were consecrated to radical discipleship, into the Jesus Movement to change this world."

That movement called Daniels and continues today, Curry said.

The cathedral is planning a dedication ceremony for the stone portrait of Daniels in October and expects Sales to attend, Eckstrom said.

When Sales met Daniels she was a 17-year-old secretary with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Lowndes County. Today, she is the founder and director of the SpiritHouse Project, an Atlanta-based nonprofit dealing with discrimination.

"Race relations today in the United States are an extension of that time period," Sales said.

"Tom Coleman was able to kill Jonathan Daniels under the cover of the law . . . Despite the fact that it has been 50 years, we are still operating in a culture where police and vigilantes can murder African Americans." —Mary Troyan, *USA Today*; Gretel Kauffman, *The Christian Science Monitor*; added sources

■ **Gary Hall**, dean of the Washington National Cathedral, announced in late August that he would be retiring from his position two years early.

"Over the past three years, the bishop, the staff, the chapter, and I have done the hard work of placing the cathedral on solid financial footing: our budget is balanced, and we are closing the books on our most successful year in recent history," Hall wrote in a letter to the cathedral community.

However, in coming decades the cathedral will need to undertake "a

major capital campaign" as well as respond to "the changing face of American religion and our country's increasing diversity," he wrote.

The cathedral will require a leader who can commit at least a decade to the job, Hall said. Hall, who became dean in 2012, wrote that "at the age of 66, with two years remaining on my contract, I am not the person for the job ahead."

The Washington National Cathedral is the seat of both the Episcopal bishop of Washington and the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. It is governed by its dean and the cathedral chapter and is also overseen by the trustees of the Protestant Episcopal Church Foundation.

Only \$1 million of the cathedral's annual budget of \$13–15 million comes from its 1,400 members, according to the Episcopal Diocese of Washington communications staff. The rest comes from major donors, tourists, and grants. The cathedral also sustained damage after a 2011 earthquake.

"How do you keep the thing that everyone loves going, the beautiful established thing, but also build a programmatic institution that's worthy of major philanthropy?" Hall told the *Washington Post*.

Hall will retire on December 31, and **Mariann Budde**, bishop of Washington, will serve as interim dean beginning January 1. The search for Hall's successor will begin in September and will be conducted by a search committee that she and the chapter will appoint.

Budde and David J. Kautter, chair of the cathedral's chapter, wrote in a letter that they received Hall's notice with sadness and gratitude.

"Sadness because Gary is a principled and creative colleague; gratitude because he has accomplished much in his three years as dean," they wrote. "One of the hallmarks of a leader is the wisdom to discern when to lead and, just as importantly, when to allow the mantle of leadership to be taken up by someone else. Gary is such a leader, and we are thankful for his attentiveness to God's call." —Washington National Cathedral, added sources



PHOTO BY PAUL EDWARD BUDDE

PHOTO BY BRENDAN HOFFMAN



# LIVING BY The Word

*September 20, 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Mark 9:30–37*

**TYPICAL, ISN'T IT?** That we remain silent when we do not understand something. That in moments when it is clear we have no idea what has been said or what is going on, we are unwilling to ask for clarification or further explanation.

Why? What are the disciples afraid of? What are we afraid of?

When we don't comprehend something, we tend to figure out all kinds of ways to assuage our discomfort. We avoid asking questions so as not to appear stupid. We don't want to expose our lack of knowledge, and so we say nothing at all. We disagree, but we dread disappointment and stay mute. It's a vulnerable place, not knowing. If we don't get it, this must have something to do with our failure and incompetence.

But what the disciples hear in this week's Gospel reading is not your usual summary of information. It may be the second Passion prediction in Mark, but being told that Jesus will be betrayed and killed and then rise again is likely no easier on the second hearing. Maybe the disciples don't ask questions because they are afraid that it could be true. The first time Jesus said it, they could sort of brush it off as something he said in passing. Now he's saying it again. And look what happened to Peter when he tried to deny the truth! The disciples are afraid.

The thing is, when you start asking questions, you may get answers that you do not want to hear or are not ready to hear. When you start asking questions, you are engaging in dialogue—and dialogue is a rather unpredictable affair. It's easier to stay silent, because monologue is a much safer place to be.

Monologue seems to be the communication mode of choice these days when it comes to faith. Rather than an act of conversation, faith has become an act of coercion. It seems to demand immediate acceptance, with little room for ambiguity. The way people talk about faith is less about the mysteries of faith and more about the mastery of convictions and doctrines and beliefs.

Mark doesn't see faith this way. The book's beginnings should tip us off that the creaturely comforts we want from our faith structures don't really work when it comes to God. Mark's Gospel immediately upends our penchant for controlling God by means of ritual, church polity, denominational loyalty, confessions, and creeds. God tears through the heavens, rips apart the temple curtain—because if God didn't, we would

continue to insist that God exists in comprehensible and accessible categories.

This is a critical point in Mark and a critical point for the disciples. There's not much time left before the events of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion will begin to unfold. And it seems unlikely that things will make more sense in that moment than here in chapter 9. This is the time for questions, the time for conversation, the time for hearing the truth. Once you enter into the events of the truth, the truth is harder to see or hear. The most meaningful moments of vulnerability should come in the midst of truth—yet this is often when we shut down. We can't handle the truth.

So we pretend that to investigate truth's many meanings will lead to our theology going awry—rather than to it being engaged in healthy complication. When you start asking questions, you start moving closer to the truth. But the truth can be difficult to hear. We are quite proficient in avoiding it, especially when it comes to the challenges of faith.

"Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters," writes Margaret Wheatley. This is what's at stake for the disciples after this second Passion prediction, and for us who tend too quickly to "solve" faith rather than seek out its possibilities. Starting conversations takes courage. You do not know where the conversation will end up. You might not like the results. The conversation may reveal what you stand for—who you are, your very truth.

Then what? What do you do when the truth of your faith is out there for all the world to see? What might happen when people see what's at stake for you, what you are willing to stand up for? Things might change. Relationships might change. Once you start asking questions, there's no going back—which is why it is easier to stay silent. Then you don't have to negotiate change, or navigate new levels of meaning in interactions that used to be comfortably predictable.

No wonder the disciples are afraid to ask Jesus questions. What might they see if they did? They would see Jesus in a different way, and they might not like what they saw. Therein lies the risk, the fear of their own betrayal. They would see one another differently, too. Their relationships might now be put to the test: Who will stay and who will go? On whom can you rely, and who will betray?

And they would be forced to see themselves in a new light, a radical reinterpretation of self. What kind of follower of Jesus am I? Can I be the disciple that he needs me to be, that my friends need me to be? Am I capable of following and living the truth of Jesus' passion? Or has my silence already convicted me of my own potential for unfaithfulness?

The courage to ask is a mark of discipleship.



# Reflections on the lectionary

September 27, 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Mark 9:38-40

**WE ARE VERY SKILLED** at stumbling blocks. That's funny, because stumbling blocks are not something at which one would aspire to attain expertise. By definition, they ought to be rather unintentional: we stumble upon them, by accident. We trip over them, sometimes but not always catching ourselves before we fall. The severity of stumbling blocks is unpredictable, too. They can be a hiccup along the way, an easily recoverable falter that neither we nor others even notice. They can also be the cause for some serious tumbling, more than a mere slip-up that is easily brushed under the rug.

At this point in Mark, directly after the second Passion prediction, stumbling blocks seem a necessary point for conversation. Why? Because we are good at placing them in others' paths, and even better at setting them before ourselves. Jesus names this truth about us, and about what it means to follow him. It's a truth that has to be called out now—because come chapter 11, there will be much over which to stumble. It's time to get ready, to prepare, to anticipate that what comes next might bring some unanticipated challenges.

Of course, Jesus doesn't really articulate where and how and why we stumble. He simply tells us that we will, and that we have the potential to cause others to as well. What is so appealing about securing the fall of another? This is a question for the human condition, one that probes the truth of our human brokenness. It's a question that everyone who claims faith in Jesus needs to answer.

When we find ourselves placing stumbling blocks in the paths of others, the truth is that we do not want them to succeed, to grow in faith, to be better disciples. We don't want them to advance, because their advancement is inevitably about our inability to do so. We don't want them to be farther along than we are.

Is this just the nature of sin, the truth of our brokenness that leads to all kinds of ways in which we stop, silence, and subjugate the other? Maybe. But we should start by being honest about the fact that we do this to ourselves, too. We regularly truncate our own potential in life, certain of our lack of abilities. Or we find security in a false sense of humility. We sabotage our own happiness, our own joy, our deserving of atten-

tion, our sense of worthiness—by way of stumbling blocks that say you are not worthy, you do not deserve it, you need to do more to earn this kind of recognition.

We put many stumbling blocks in our own paths, with no one else to blame. We come up with all sorts of impediments as to why we are inadequate in our faith, why we are rather mediocre disciples, why we should be deemed believers who do not have it all together. You don't have enough faith, and even if you do, you don't go to church often enough. You don't read your Bible on a regular basis. Your obedience to the Ten Commandments leaves much to be desired. And you don't pray enough. Not enough good works, not enough time and money given to the church.

In short, you are just not good enough. You are not worthy. Come on, we are talking about being a Christian! There are a lot of expectations in this job, and we just can't seem to live up to them.

Jesus knows this, and he says that we should stop. Just stop it. This isn't a competition. It isn't about who gets to the finish line first or who is the best disciple. It's about following. When you truly follow, your eyes aren't on yourself or the person

**Jesus doesn't tell us where and how and why we stumble. He simply tells us that we will.**

next to you. Following takes paying attention to what is in front of you—not because you and the person next to you don't matter, but because the person you're following has a claim on how you see yourself and how you see the other. When we truly see what is in front of us—Jesus, what Jesus does, who Jesus is and isn't—then the chances for stumbling blocks diminish. We start to see that Jesus is beyond our best efforts to limit, sideline, abscond, or silence.

We will continue to try, of course. This is why Jesus has to call out our efforts to cause ourselves and others to stumble. The gospel of Jesus Christ—the good news for us, the certainty that God is present here and now—will not allow us to thwart God's insistence on being among us, rather than hidden in heaven or tamed behind a curtain. Your God is here. Nothing you do can secure a different truth.

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*The author is Karoline M. Lewis, associate professor of biblical preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.*



OUR PROTESTANT AGRARIAN PAST

# Soil and soul

by Kevin M. Lowe

## THE IDEA OF environmental

stewardship has so thoroughly structured contemporary Christian thought that almost all Christian organizations characterize their efforts to care for creation in terms of stewardship. The scholarly consensus has been that the idea of stewardship is a relatively recent phenomenon within American Christianity. Robert Booth Fowler, for instance, has argued that Protestants really awoke to environmental challenges only after the first Earth Day in 1970.

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*Kevin M. Lowe is an independent scholar of American religious history. He received his doctorate from Pennsylvania State University in 2013. This essay is adapted from his forthcoming book Baptized with the Soil: Christian Agrarians and the Crusade for Rural America. Used with permission from Oxford University Press USA. © Oxford University Press.*



Not only is stewardship seen as a recent development, but historians have argued that it was originally a secular idea, adopted later by Christians. Typically, the idea of stewardship is traced back to Aldo Leopold's 1949 *A Sand County Almanac*. Mark Stoll, for instance, has argued that when Christianity embraced the idea of stewardship, it was "essentially an act of baptism of the thoroughly secular Aldo Leopold's 'land ethic.'"

Significant as Leopold's land ethic was, Protestant agrarians had in fact developed the idea of stewardship a decade or more earlier than Leopold. During the Depression, they were already constructing a theology of agriculture and conservation that looked very much like Leopold's. This theology of stewardship was developed in congregations, on farms, and in the meetings of missionary organizations and government offices. It wove together the three elements that environmental historian Donald Worster argues were new in Leopold's thought: science, ecology, and the importance of community.

For much of the 20th century, mainline Protestants were more concerned than anyone else with rural communities.

## For much of the 20th century, mainline Protestants were more concerned than anyone else with rural communities.

Protestant agrarians staunchly defended family farms, small-scale agriculture, and face-to-face rural communities. But by 1930, when agrarians looked at the countryside, they could not avoid seeing the environmental consequences of the industrial transformation of agriculture. One of the biggest problems they noticed was the widespread degradation of the soil caused by intensive and short-sighted agricultural practices. Particularly in the Midwest, where vast expanses of monocropped fields were typical, erosion of the land was drastic and rapid. By the time the Depression hit, soil erosion was so severe that estimates placed the number of ruined acres at approximately 35 million, with hundreds of millions of additional acres severely damaged. It would take nature on its own, according to the government, at least 400 years to replace just one inch of lost topsoil.

For decades, Protestant agrarians devoted themselves to the cause of soil conservation, joining with secular groups as well as the federal government to encourage farmers to protect and rebuild their soil. They devised both theological justifications and concrete plans for dealing with soil degradation. They called upon farmers to see it as their duty to conserve the land that God had created.

The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl caused the federal government to begin addressing soil degradation. The Roosevelt administration created the Soil Erosion Service as part of the Department of the Interior in 1933, and in 1935 the SES was transferred to the Department of Agriculture and renamed the Soil Conservation Service.

But the cause of soil conservation was never the exclusive province of agricultural scientists and federal officials. Religious leaders of all kinds championed the idea that soil conservation was a Christian duty. In 1943, John Reisner, director of Agricultural Missions, Inc., stated that "the whole world must recover reverence for the land. . . . We dare no longer dissociate religion and land in our everyday thinking or in our Christian worship." Reisner believed that to damage God's land was not just foolish but deeply sinful. "If there is any one clear lesson taught in the Bible and borne out by the experience of mankind," he argued, "it is that the wrong use of land is not only a crime against society but a sin against the living God."

As early as 1922, Edwin L. Earp, professor of sociology at Drew University, published *Biblical Backgrounds for the Rural Message*, in which he argued that the biblical writers had a "consciousness of rural facts and situations else they could not have used them intelligently nor could their hearers or readers have understood them unless they, too, were rural-minded." Earp provided scriptural references for a wide variety of agrarian arguments and principles, ranging from agricultural procedures to community life and the building of the kingdom of God. On the importance of the land itself, for example, Earp pointed not to Genesis but to Leviticus 25:1–23 and Deuteronomy 11:11–12, in which the promised land and the Year of Jubilee were described. Earp drew a lesson about soil fertility and soil conservation from Matthew 13:3–8—the parable of the sower—and from Jeremiah 4:3, in which the Israelites are instructed not to sow amidst thorns. "The church must preach and teach the gospel of the sacredness of the soil," Earp concluded, "as the gift of God in trust for all the people, the sin of soil depletion and the peril to the nation when the land is robbed of its crop-producing values."

Congregationalist leader Malcolm Dana published *Christ of the Countryside* in 1937, in which he retold the life of Jesus from an agricultural perspective. Dana emphasized the ways in which Jesus' language betrayed his country origins: "Christ of the Countryside is acquainted with the agriculture of his time and country; and he believes in the dignity and worth of an avocation which has more to do with creative processes than any other. . . . Thirty-two of his sixty-four parables take his listeners out into the open country, and thirty-seven of his forty-eight miracles have an outdoor background. . . . Such knowledge and use of the world of growing things naturally result in a special interest in the farmer and farming of Palestine." To Dana, and to other Protestant agrarians, Jesus had an agricultural mind.

Building on this biblical understanding, denominational leaders helped promote soil conservation. In 1937, for instance, Mark Dawber, superintendent of the Department of Town and Country Work for the Methodist Board of Home Missions, criticized Americans for their improper attitude toward the earth, relying on the moral force of another of Jesus' parables: "It is this sense of stewardship of the land that is lost. We have wasted its riches prodigally, and now we are learning the bitter lesson of the prodigal." Dawber was a major proponent of the government's soil conservation efforts because of his



Protestant agrarian ethic, not primarily because of conservation's scientific or economic benefits. "We have sinned against God's holy earth through ignorance, selfishness and greed," wrote Dawber. "Fortunately, a new day is dawning. We are waking to our unfaithful stewardship and our perils. . . . The church has a responsibility to keep before its people the sacred trust that is involved in the stewardship of the soil."

A broadly ecumenical statement called "Man's Relation to the Land" was published in 1945, signed by representatives from dozens of Christian denominations and organizations, both Protestant and Catholic, as well as rabbis, Jewish seminary professors, and representatives from the Jewish Agricultural Society. The statement acknowledged that "the land is God's greatest material gift to mankind. . . . Ownership of land does not give an absolute right to use or abuse, nor is it devoid of social responsibilities. It is in fact a stewardship."

The ecumenical group agreed that family farm ownership was to be encouraged because the family was the primary unit of society, and that living standards, wages, and Social Security benefits ought to be broadly and justly available to all. But stewarding the land was fundamental, because "the land steward has a duty to enrich the soil he tills and to hand it down to future generations as a thank offering to God, the giver, and as a loving inheritance to his children's children."

By 1950, a columnist for *Progressive Farmer* predicted that in the coming decade, rural Christians would be increasingly devoted to the idea of soil conservation. "A growing emphasis will be made on the relation that exists between man, land, and God," wrote James Sells. "This will result in preaching and teaching the necessity for the salvation of the soil and continued control of soil erosion." Sells, in keeping with the eschatological view of other Protestant agrarians, saw conservation as

a matter of supreme importance. "The former emphasis was to escape hell and gain heaven. The future emphasis will be [to] drive evil out of the present world and to establish heaven on earth, thus making the Christian a fit occupant for the heaven to come." The social gospel of societal perfection remained strong among Protestant agrarians into the 1950s.

During that decade, the federal government began experimenting again with rural policy, with an interest in stemming the epidemic of rural poverty and agricultural industrialization. The USDA Rural Development Program, instituted in 1955, was, according to Laura Kolar, "the first federal effort to recognize the changing needs for, uses and role of rural America's resources, including farms themselves, after World War II." The RDP set up pilot community development projects through the USDA Extension Service. These projects extended credit to farmers seeking improvements, offered technical assistance for conservation practices and ancillary sources of farm income like forestry, and set up recreational opportunities aimed at rural people. Although the program was chronically underfunded when compared with other USDA programs, its contributions nevertheless paved the way for federal conservation efforts in the 1960s and '70s.

The National Council of Churches, founded in 1950, applauded the USDA's efforts. In response, Undersecretary of Agriculture True D. Morse, director of the program invited the NCC to participate in the program's organization and activities. A full-time NCC staff member, based in Memphis, was appointed to work exclusively with the program and was "available for consultation to churches and church groups and secular agencies as well as local, state and federal government agencies working in the program." The NCC, in keeping with its policy that "the church has had an historic concern for the

wise use of the earth's resources and believes that proper conservation of natural and human resources are [sic] basic to the fulfillment of Christian stewardship," found the RDP beneficial.

The NCC encouraged pastors to discuss the Rural Development Program with their parishioners, emphasizing "the unity of life, cooperation and working with others, concern for those less fortunate, and helping people to help themselves." In addition, ministers as well as laypeople served on the county-level and state-level committees that administered the RDP. Christian presence was prominent, because the federal government realized the importance of engaging rural Christians and church leaders in the effort to improve rural life.

Leaders of the NCC's Department of the Town and Country Church began to realize that the challenges facing American farmers were deeper than simply economic. The department acknowledged that "many churches of rural America had a deep and abiding interest in 'the land' and the role that it should play in the future of American Agriculture."

In 1955, the department sponsored a confer-

## Tell me tell me tell me

I board the airplane to see my parents. They live far away and long ago  
And some years into the future; you never met such wry time machines  
In your life. Sometimes they will be about to pass the marmalade when  
Suddenly it is late 1941 and they are in college and kissing on the train;  
But then as you slather your toast it is 1967 and a war wants to eat their  
Son or 2012 and they are at that son's wake or 1929 and a father comes  
Home without his job, or it is a week ago, and do you think that Federer  
Is the finest tennis player ever, or Laver, or Don Budge? It happens that  
Fast. It's unnerving and glorious and confusing and perfect and I would  
Sit with them every afternoon, if I could, and say tell me tell me tell me,  
Tell me every moment of your whole lives, don't leave me here without  
Your grace and humor and the extraordinary gleaming jar of marmalade  
From which come all your stories. *Next year in Ireland* . . . says my mother,  
And my dad grins, and I want to kneel and beg the Lord for this moment  
Again and again always, the inarguable yes of their bodies, the resonance  
Of their endurance, the hunch and hollow of their shoulders, the reverent  
Geography of their faces, the lean song of my father's hands on the table.

Brian Doyle



ence at the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary that focused directly on the issue of land stewardship. It was attended by representatives from the NCC and leaders from the major rural denominations; representatives from the USDA Agricultural Research Service, Soil Conservation Service, Farmers Home Administration, Farm Credit Administration, and National Association of Conservation Districts; members of the major farm organizations such as the Farm Foundation, American Farm Bureau Federation, and National Grange; and academics interested in rural and religious issues.

The authors of a preconference paper circulated by the NCC suggested four essential principles of conservation. First, land use should always be in the service of humans, and “the good of the land should never take precedence over human well-being.” Second, land use was immediately important; planning should address the needs of people currently living on the land. Third, although immediate needs were critical, land use should look to the needs of future generations as well, because “Christian stewardship morally obligates each generation to pass on a land resource of higher quality than it received.” And fourth, any conservationist work needed to recognize the ultimate sovereignty of God, and that “a ‘good life’ is the result of faithful relation to Him.”

The NCC also distributed a list of relevant scripture passages, from both the Old and New Testaments, as proof texts for the principles they suggested, including Micah 4:4—an

illustration of what the authors called “the ideal land tenure”—which read, “but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.”

At Louisville, the conference accepted the four principles and set forth a broad definition of stewardship: “Christian stewardship is the systematic practice of using all one’s powers and the material assets which have been entrusted to one’s care for the furtherance of God’s will and the fulfillment of His purpose.” But using material resources responsibly was difficult. The conference agreed that “it is impossible to separate the stewardship of one resource from that of the others.” In an agricultural context, this meant that soil was a “dynamic” resource, one whose health is constantly affected by other environmental changes.

A study guide for the conference proceedings, distributed by the NCC and aimed at rural pastors, reemphasized the importance of taking care of the soil. “No matter how many devastating wars, no matter how many new boundaries and no matter how much shifting of peoples over the earth, there is one unchanging phenomenon—world without end, community by community—and that is dependence on the land.” The guide urged pastors to learn as much about the local land situation as possible and to introduce conservation and land use questions into their sermons and discuss them in Sunday school classes and adult gatherings. The study guide also sug-



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gested that churches create farm and land stewardship committees and “think about setting up a revolving loan fund to help one or more young couples get started [in farming].”

Critics of the churches’ involvement with conservation seem to have been in the minority. The spiritual necessity of soil conservation was apparent not only to religious professionals; it appeared in ostensibly secular places as well and was widely publicized. In the 1940s, building on its successful promotion of conservation measures during the Dust Bowl, the Soil Conservation Service published a small booklet called *The Lord’s Land*. Written by Morris Fonda in cooperation with the conservationist organization Friends of the Land, and financed and published by the Sears-Roebuck Foundation, the booklet described the work of the SCS in deeply religious terms.

The SCS booklet began, as so many agrarian documents did, with Psalm 24. If “the earth was the Lord’s,” then humans had a vocation to stewardship.

The Christian perspective that had structured the soil conservation movement for decades received another boost in the 1950s with the involvement of the National Association of Soil Conservation Districts. This organization, created in 1946, oversaw a network of 1,638 soil conservation districts. Those districts had been created under the SCS as departments of state governments and were responsible for devising conservation plans appropriate to the local area. Typically they formed voluntary agreements with landowners to have their recommendations carried out. In many states they also enacted binding regulations concerning land use. By the 1960s, conservation districts encompassed nearly 2 billion acres of land, with participation by 92 percent of the nation’s farms.

In 1955, less than ten years after the formation of the NASCD, the organization began appealing to the nation’s Christians for help in promoting soil conservation. The organization threw its weight behind an annual observance called Soil Stewardship Sunday, when churches were called to address the issue of soil conservation either in the regular sermon for that day or in special added services.

Soil Stewardship Sunday had been initially devised by the publishers of *Farm and Ranch* magazine as “Soil and Soul Sunday” in 1946. Because response among its readership was strongly positive, the magazine offered the idea to the NASCD in the fall of 1954. The following spring, the NASCD became the sole sponsor of Soil Stewardship Sunday. In 1956, the NASCD expanded the observance from a single day into Soil Stewardship Week, scheduled between the fifth and sixth Sundays of Easter. The decision to expand the observance from a single day to a full week was based on the recognition that many churches were already observing the fifth Sunday after Easter as Rural Life Sunday.

Like Rural Life Sunday before it, Soil Stewardship Sunday drew on the influence of national government. Rural Life Sunday had been heavily promoted by 4-H and the USDA Extension Service. Similarly, the NASCD, and in particular the advisory committee that oversaw the stewardship observance, operated from an explicitly Christian standpoint that saw stewardship as the responsibility of all true Christians.

Each year the NASCD published materials for churches

that would assist them with discussing and promoting stewardship among their congregations. The NASCD’s simplest message was that the earth was a gift easily destroyed. Soil in particular was an astounding ecosystem unto itself, which both gave life to growing plants and absorbed decomposing organisms. “While these two processes seem to be in opposition to each other,” the NASCD wrote in 1957, “they actually are in complete harmony. They are engaged in a collaboration so harmonious and so intricate that it should cause the child of God to stand in awe at the wisdom of his Creator.” Pastors all around the nation adopted Soil Stewardship Sunday in their churches and preached on environmental stewardship.

By 1970, however, the energy in the Christian agrarian movement had largely dissipated. Major agrarian publications had gone out of existence by the end of the 1960s: the *Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin* ceased publication in 1968, as did the NCC’s organ *Town and Country Church*. The NCC’s National Convocation on the Church in Town and Country published its last report in 1964.

## Churches began observing Soil Stewardship Sunday in the ‘50s.

Institutional memory could be short. In 1970, one participant presented a position paper at an NCC conference arguing that member churches should develop a position on environmental activism but made no reference to the decades-long tradition of environmental thought among Christian agrarians.

By the early 1970s, Christian agrarianism had become largely invisible. The decline of Christian agrarianism seems to have gone largely unmentioned, even by agrarians themselves, which makes it difficult to explain the change. Still, it is possible to speculate as to some likely factors.

Clear changes in the economics of American agriculture must have had their effects. In the early 1970s, U.S. farm exports, which ever since the Depression had kept fairly steady with imports, suddenly spiked. The Soviet Union began purchasing tremendous quantities of wheat and other commodity crops, “turning public discussion from chronic grain surpluses to shortages.” After 1972, agricultural exports dramatically exceeded imports. Industrialized agriculture was poised to provide for this international demand, whereas family-farm agriculture was focused inward on the local community.

Other economic changes between 1950 and 1970 affected the agricultural landscape. The total number of American farms was still dropping precipitously; there were only about half as many farms in 1970 as there had been in 1950. The remaining farms were larger, with the average farm rising from about 175 acres at the end of World War II to over 400 by the mid-1970s. The farm population in 1970 was about one-third of what it had been at the end of the war, and the urban population was increasing



even faster than the farm population was declining. Meanwhile, the market value of agricultural land had increased steadily. Farm household income also grew rapidly in the postwar period; in the 1960s, the median farm household income increased by almost 6 percent each year. By 1990, farm households were making almost four times as much as they had in 1950.

In this changed climate, where farmers were fewer but more prosperous, mainline Christian agrarians must certainly have lost hope of being able to stem the tide. Their projects, arguments, and theologies over the previous decades had had an influence on people, congregations, and communities, but not on the overall agricultural economy. Despite their best efforts, industrial agriculture had become entrenched and made the family farm, as the agrarians conceived it, seem increasingly anachronistic. Mainline churches began to turn their attention to the developing world, where they focused less on agriculture itself than on poverty relief and rural aid. Programs like the Christian Rural Overseas Program and the Heifer Project encouraged American farmers to see themselves as part of a larger world community. If industrial agriculture could not be stopped, at least its negative effects could be alleviated.

At the same time, suburbanization and affluence created a set of expectations that made the hard work of farming and rural life seem even less appealing. The middle class had grown significantly since World War II, and it was easier for many people to make a decent living. Food, housing, and consumer goods were cheaper than they had been earlier in the century. Many cities were no longer the dirty, inhumane industrial wastelands they had seemed to the agrarians at the beginning of the century.

Christian agrarians also found themselves increasingly out of step among American Protestants. Their quiet commitment to their social gospel heritage did not align with the tremendous visibility of the new evangelicals who were beginning to dominate American culture. Agrarians, and mainline Protestants in general, had no interest in forming megachurches or sponsoring mass revivals. The savvy preaching style of figures like Billy Graham did not appeal to agrarians. In fact, outsized evangelical congregations contradicted the most fundamental philosophy of agrarianism: that communities should be small, personal, and neighborly. From an agrarian perspective, there was nothing neighborly about a church service in a sports stadium. Evangelicals and mainline Protestants both spoke of the kingdom of God, but they did so in very different ways. Mainline churches continued to lose membership in significant numbers, and the effect of their agrarian witness was drastically reduced.

In terms of simply stopping industrial

agriculture or expanding mainline denominations, Christian agrarians certainly failed—although environmental stewardship is once again a topic of discussion in many churches. But their influence cannot adequately be measured by counting farms or congregations. Rather, it can be seen in the degree to which agrarian ideas were received into the broader culture, including the environmental and conservation movements. This may in fact be the most critical reason that agrarians seem to have receded from the spotlight.

After 1970, the secular environmental movement took primary responsibility for promoting agricultural conservation and soil stewardship. Environmentalists developed the idea of “sustainable agriculture” as a countercultural alternative to conventional agriculture, and this new language overshadowed the long history of agrarian conservation. National advocacy groups like American Farmland Trust have taken up the agrarian commitment to family farms. The belief that society is bettered when families own their own land and have close relationships with their communities is lived out in farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture programs.

A new generation of young farmers is now purchasing land and starting small farms (sometimes even in the middle of cities), trying to revive localized agriculture. If proponents of these things do not always refer to God in the same breath, at least they are doing the things that the early 20th-century Protestant agrarians had wanted.

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# Belonging or not

by Amy Frykholm

**WHEN I WAS** 12 and had just been baptized at a Baptist church, I refused to receive the “right hand of fellowship.” This adolescent choice heralded a lifelong hesitancy about the dynamics of church belonging.

Maybe I was slightly ahead of my time. The sociological research of Robert Putnam, the Pew studies on church affiliation, and lots of anecdotal evidence have told us that belonging is a challenge of our age. All kinds of civic groups are struggling for members, the church most significantly. Fewer people are choosing to participate in church and even fewer choose to join. I am not alone in finding it a challenge.

In part this may be because of the arbitrariness of belonging. As people are increasingly mobile, roots in a particular congregation or denomination do not go deep. Denominational differences become questions of style or a preference for a particular minister. Church-based relationships are disrupted by work, moving, Sunday morning soccer games, and life transitions. Diana Butler Bass expresses the concerns of many when she worries that church-related identities have been replaced by consumerism and nostalgia. We buy our identities instead of live them, and such identities are inherently shallow. Yet no amount of theorizing changes the fundamental problem: belonging takes a commitment that is increasingly countercultural.

My baptism at Trinity Baptist Church was my second baptism. The first was when I was an infant. I was baptized by my father at the First Presbyterian Church in Flint, Michigan. Later, I watched my father baptize babies, and it was rather thrilling to see him hold the baby in his arms and walk her up and down the aisle, talking in a gentle voice to both the child and the congregation. A calm descended over him and, in my imagination at least, over the child as he spoke words of welcome and acceptance. He wore white robes and stood in front of a font made of polished wood. His hands scooped water over the baby's head three times.

The event contained a mystery: Why did a child who comes directly from God need to be formally accepted into the family of God? Why did the welcome require a rite? And why was the rite moving?

As an adolescent, I attended a Baptist church, and I watched members of the youth group stand before the congregation, read a testimony of faith, and get submerged in the water. I wanted the same. I wanted the white robe they wore and what each of the newly baptized received: a special Bible

verse. I wanted to enter that body of water that lay behind the pulpit, mysterious and beckoning.

I was baptized on an Easter Sunday. Pastor Tim dipped me fully into the water while I held my nose. It was like disappearing, going into something black and blank and empty. While I closed my eyes and held my breath, only the wild pounding of my heart reminded me that I was alive. I came back up to the applause of the congregation and then moved awkwardly in my sodden robe to a side door and down steps to the basement, where a towel and dry clothes awaited me.

**I could not see the meaning of membership or belonging for my own life.**

Later, while Easter dinner was being prepared, I wondered if baptism changed anything. Was I new? Clean? I remember wanting to move carefully in case my new life could be sullied by quick movements and impulsive decisions.

The next step in the Baptist tradition was to formally join the congregation by receiving the “right hand of fellowship.” For whatever reason, I said, “No, thank you.” I wanted the water and not the fellowship, the ritual and not the belonging. Maybe I was simply too shy, and getting up in front of the congregation once was as much as I could handle. Or did I have some deeper ambivalence about the process? Was I really a Baptist? Did I want to belong to Trinity Baptist Church? Apparently I did not.

**F**or 25 years I wandered in and out of churches, sometimes staying long enough for someone to learn my name, but not often. I could not see the meaning of membership or belonging for my own life. I could not sign up, and I was transient enough that it did not matter.

But perhaps sensing that my life was in danger of a certain shallowness, I started attending St. George Episcopal Church in Leadville, Colorado, in my thirties and became a regular. I cooked at the community meal, chanted psalms, served on various committees. One confirmation class after another came and went. I hadn't the slightest craving to join them.

Confirmation meant not only formally joining this community; it also meant joining a denomination. I had no reason to



think of myself as an Episcopalian. Diana Butler Bass says that “belonging is an issue of identity.” But if I could be said to belong to St. George’s up until this point, it had been not an issue of identity, but one of experience. I felt that I belonged among these people, but I didn’t think that I was one of them. If I became an Episcopalian, then the answer to “who are you?” would become, at least in part, “I am an Episcopalian.” I could not quite make sense of that.

I found denominational thinking itself odd. Denominations seemed to represent an excess of belonging. For years, I had the responsibility of writing the pledge check from my little church to the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado, and each time I couldn’t help thinking: “Why are we supporting you? We are poor, and you are rich. We have trouble paying one priest a part-time salary and you have a staff of dozens.” To my mind, the flourishing of denominations was a fault of the 19th and 20th centuries—bloated and unnecessary, a byproduct of the Industrial Revolution.

I had never felt an allegiance to a denomination. I loved the Lutherans for their great sung liturgy, I loved one Methodist preacher for the hand-woven stoles she wore, I loved the Quakers for their silence, I loved the Catholics for the preservation of ancient words, I loved the Presbyterians for organizing the yearly CROP Walk for Hunger, and I loved the Orthodox for the smell of incense and burnt wax and for their whispering icons. And now I loved the Episcopalians for their Book of Common Prayer, which linked people continent to continent with simple, beautiful prayers. But these individual loves—each based on a sliver of experience—did not compel me to join up with any one in particular.

Years before I arrived at St. George, a great fight had broken out about the roof of the church. Some wanted to put on a metal roof—something very common in this mountain community, where the heavy snow and bright sunshine create ice dams that can be a couple of feet high and put great pressure on shingled roofs. Others thought that a metal roof would compromise the historic character of the building. The fight became bitter, and everyone lost. No new roof was put on the building, and nearly everyone involved in the argument left the church.

The roof eventually began to leak. Water damage appeared on the sanctuary ceiling and walls. One winter, the ice dam on the east side of the building was menacingly high, and you could almost hear the shingles groaning under the weight. Every Sunday, I looked up at the spreading water stains and worried. One night I dreamed that

the entire east wall of the church collapsed. I felt that I was somehow responsible. “We were too late,” I said to myself in the dream.

That spring, I joined the confirmation class. I didn’t have an explanation for it. Partly I was embarrassed to have served as the warden of the church—“bishop’s warden,” no less, in the Episcopal lexicon—and to be involved in every detail of the church’s function and organization yet be squeamish about membership. On a practical level, I felt that joining would help my priests: they could put my name on the roster and call it “growth.” But I didn’t come to the decision with any resolution of my inner conflict.

The dream also haunted me. This little church had sheltered me, body and spirit, for nearly a decade. If I didn’t claim it, would it melt away?

Our confirmation class was given a simple assignment. We were to read all the biblical passages that are part of the Easter Vigil and select the story that was most “ours.” Which one of the stories of salvation history—from the story of creation, to the journey in the wilderness, to the words of the prophets, to the final gathering of God’s people—spoke most to us? Where did we enter the story? The plan was that we would tell about our choice when the bishop came for the ceremony of confirmation.

Still wrestling with my reluctance, I chose the story in Ezekiel about the valley of the dry bones. I felt that the ques-

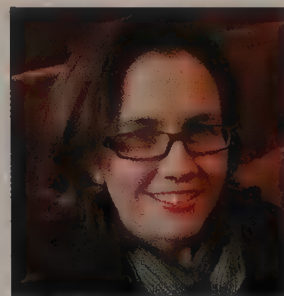


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tion, "Can these bones live?" was my question, and not one to which I had an answer. Sometimes I felt I was in that valley, not knowing where to begin to put the pieces together. I wondered about joining myself formally to Christianity. Was I joining a tradition whose cultural relevance was dying? Was I joined to a dead body, the hip bone connected to the thigh bone? Can these bones live? Can this action bring life to me and to others? What meaning did resurrection have in my own life? I didn't know how I was going to express all this to the bishop, and I wondered if he would reject my "entering place" as insufficient for confirmation. I imagined him staring at me, puzzled, and saying, "Not good enough!" But it was all I had.

## Belonging is not a possession; even as it is claimed or imagined, it changes.

On the day of confirmation, the bishop arrived at church at the same time as my son and I did. As we got out of our cars, Sam, age five, went up to him and asked, "Why do bishops always move diagonally?" Bishop Rob played along. "There are a lot of things about bishops that aren't quite straight," he answered. That encouraged Sam to ask his next question, his favorite joke. "What kind of churches are there in outer space?"

"I don't know. What kind?"

"Episco-alien!"

The confirmation class gathered in the community room, 15 of us around a long table. I poured myself a cup of coffee so I would have something to cling to while people talked. I looked at my fellow confirmands and felt strange to be there. I knew their stories, which included experiences of sexual abuse, child abuse, domestic abuse, drug abuse, and alcoholism. I saw brokenness and loneliness and people scratching out their lives. With a Ph.D., I was the most educated person in the room, and that made precisely not one iota of difference. Somehow we were all washed up on this shore in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, like people from a shipwreck.

The first person to speak about a Bible passage was Floyd. He sat in his metal folding chair with his long, white beard and overalls, hands in his pockets, nervously jingling his keys. His eyes were bright blue and exaggerated by the lenses of his glasses. His life had been defined by a mental breakdown he had suffered in the Vietnam War. Ever after, his claims on sanity had been tenuous. He fixed cars and lived quietly, eating breakfast at the Golden Burro and going to West Central Mental Health Center for antidepressants. At the community meal our church hosted, he often brought the latest commentary from Fox News and Rush Limbaugh.

"Well," he said to the bishop, "I picked Genesis 1, the story of creation." He stared down at the plastic tablecloth in front of him and then looked around the room. "Before I came to



this church, I was formless and void. Darkness was all around me. Then God moved over my waters, and there was light.”

The pause that followed was long. Floyd had shifted the ground under our feet. In just a few words, Floyd had all but made a mockery of my convoluted speech about the dry bones of Ezekiel. Did I have anything that honest that I could say? My cynicism looked petty—as did my speeches about the church in America, about culture and agnosticism, and my own peevish doubts.

We continued around the circle. Linda, the woman sitting next to me, had come to St. George through the church’s community meals. She was well known for her anger that often seemed larger than her thin frame could handle. One day when both our children were playing at the park, she asked me, “What can I do when I get so angry?” It was not a rhetorical question.

When it was Linda’s turn to speak, she said: “I chose Psalm 122, especially the part where it says, ‘May there be peace in your towers,’ because that is what I need. Peace in my towers. I never knew that an old book like that one could say exactly what was inside me.”

Then it was my turn. I felt everything I had wanted to say had already turned to sawdust. There was no space for intellectualizing, for holding myself apart. I stumbled through my choice of the dry bones story, with a big stick in the back of my throat. Then I said, “Everything you all have said is so beautiful. That’s what I mean. I am grateful to have found you. Grateful to be a part of you. That’s all.”

The ceremony of confirmation was simple. “There is one Body and one Spirit,” we recited. “There is one hope in God’s call to us.” We renewed our baptismal covenant with ancient words of belief. We committed ourselves to resisting evil, to seeking and serving Christ in all persons, and to striving for the dignity of every human being. I knelt before the bishop in his silly pointed hat, and he placed his hands on my head. He prayed for my sustenance. And for Floyd’s and for Linda’s.

Since then, Linda has moved away. Floyd committed suicide, a consequence of unrelenting PTSD. Perhaps those facts illustrate one of my greatest difficulties with belonging, one of its terrible risks: the thing to which you claim to belong changes minute by minute. “Community,” Martin Buber said, “is the moment’s answer to the moment’s question.”

Belonging is not a possession; even as it is claimed or imagined, it changes.

No wonder people drive by churches and don’t go in: the risks are great, the rewards intangible. The forming of a community is fragile and takes a lifetime. It can disappear in a breath. And yet I think of Robert Hass’s poem “Spring Rain”: “The blessedness of gathering and the / blessing of dispersal— / it made you glad for beauty like that, casual and intense, / lasting as long as the poppies last.” That is belonging for me—not an identity, but a gathering and a dispersal, a moment for which I am glad.

CC

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# Delight in preaching

by Jason Byassee

I HAD a physical education teacher who had the unenviable task of teaching sex education to us sixth graders. One day she held up a worksheet with various parts of the anatomy labeled, and apologized: “I know this is sort of unromantic.”

Books on preaching can leave us similarly cold. The authors I’m reviewing agree that the real goal of such books is sermons that glorify God and edify the church and world—not sermons that fit someone’s worksheet for preaching.

Timothy Keller’s *Preaching* is, like the sermons he preaches at Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City, full of both homespun wisdom and academic rigor. Martin Marty once said that the best wisdom in the church comes from the left of the right and the right of the left—which is not the same as the middle. Keller is on the left of his right-wing church, the Presbyterian Church in America, and is one of the best sources of wisdom in the church today.

## Keller’s readings of scripture make me want to preach.

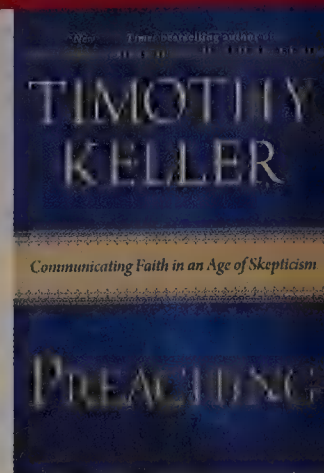
He makes the case here for doing more expository preaching than most mainline ministers do. Such preaching shows the congregation that the preacher holds the entire Bible to be true. It also offers sermons with more depth for longtime churchgoers than does topical preaching aimed at outsiders. While I’m not likely to start offering a verse-by-verse exposition of, say, Judges, Keller nudges me to let scripture lead and my pet topics fall away.

Keller is at his best in engaging cultural issues—surely the gift that makes his ministry such a success in Gotham. The gospel, he writes, says “yes and no and yes” to our deepest moral longings. Our desire for inclusion or justice comes from God’s own passion for those things. Yet the gospel also says no to many forms of human longing in their current sinful state. In Christ these longings are judged, then gathered up and restored in new and surprising form. I won’t preach to the culture in quite the same way after reading that.

There’s an odd fault line in Keller’s footnotes (and he has nearly 100 pages of them). His interlocutors on hermeneutics are all conservative PCA types to his right (among whom Keller would be condemned as a dangerous liberal were he not so successful a pastor). His interlocutors on culture, however,

are mostly Catholics, with a heavy helping of Charles Taylor. I’d like to see him challenge his own sources more in hermeneutics and read as broadly on that topic as he does on others. But his readings of scripture are brilliant, and they make me want to preach—something rather rare for a book on homiletics.

Luke Powery wrote *Dem Dry Bones* while he was a professor of preaching at Princeton Theological Seminary and before becoming dean of Duke Chapel. He takes aim at prosperity preaching among his fellow African Americans: “Preaching that ignores death is irresponsible, a theological lie, and unable to declare real hope.” The painful irony of prosperity preaching in the black community is that



### Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism

By Timothy Keller  
Viking, 320 pp., \$19.95

### Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope

By Luke A. Powery  
Fortress, 160 pp., \$20.00 paperback

### Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching

By Leonard Sweet  
Zondervan, 368 pp., \$22.99

### The Mission of Preaching: Equipping the Community for Faithful Witness

By Patrick W. T. Johnson  
IVP Academic, 239 pp., \$25.00 paperback

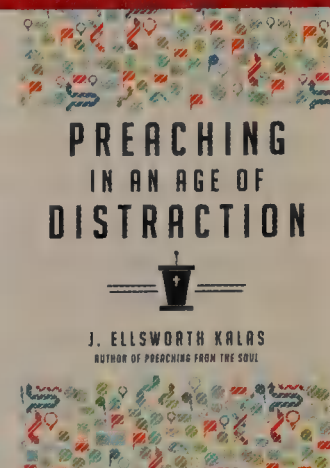
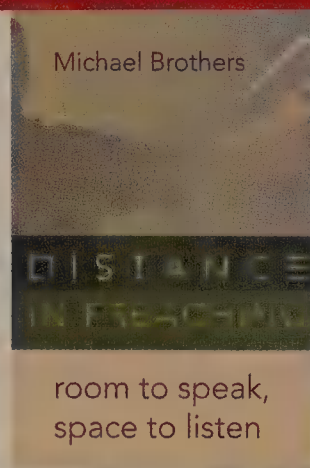
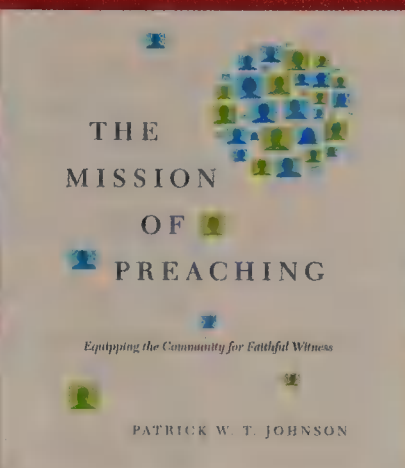
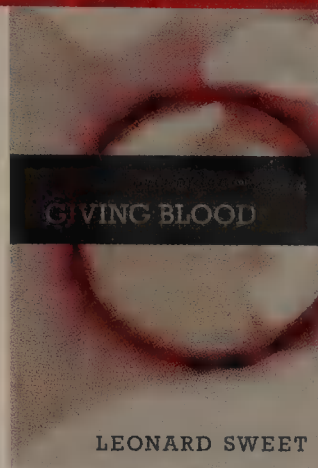
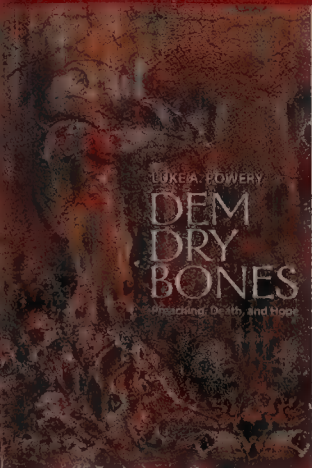
### Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Space to Listen

By Michael Brothers  
Eerdmans, 189 pp., \$20.00 paperback

### Preaching in an Age of Distraction

By J. Ellsworth Kalas  
IVP, 167 pp., \$16.00 paperback





the African-American church gave the world the inestimable treasure of the spirituals, with their embodiment of deep pain and unfathomable hope. This book and two others in an “informal trilogy” that Powery calls *Spirit Speech* tenderly unpack this tradition for the cause of preaching.

My first reaction to Powery was that he was condemning somebody else’s sins. My church doesn’t go in for teaching prosperity, does it? But Powery turned on me like Paul does on the Romans, showing how we all seek blessings from God without crosses in them.

White liberal churches don’t sing spirituals often enough, and when they do it can come off as patronizing. But spirituals can be the remedy for an ailment the church doesn’t know it has. They’re born of suffering, struggle, blood, and death—which much preaching ignores. To quote a source Powery does not, Karl Barth: “Only where there are graves can there be resurrection.”

Powery sides with those scholars who say the talk of heaven in the spirituals is not escapist or otherworldly—it envisions another reality *within* this world. He also takes a swipe at theologians who seek bloodless atonement or none at all. Black preaching doesn’t just convey information. It renders God present. The spirituals feature a deep biblicism that is not bibliolatry.

Powery includes the words of an unnamed preacher quoted by James Weldon Johnson: “Brothers and sisters, this morning I intend to explain the unexplainable—find out the undefinable—ponder over the imponderable—and unscrew the inscrutable.” Powery shows us how to do that.

But I wanted to hear more from Powery on how churches embody the death-defying homiletic of the spirituals. He has three concrete examples—his own near-death experience as an infant, a moving story about a Mozambican woman giving birth while taking refuge

from a flood, and his brother singing a praise song over the grave of his child. I’d love to hear how whole communities make these bones live in their life together. Perhaps that’s for the promised next volume.

I hated Leonard Sweet’s *Giving Blood* for the first 100 pages. Sweet has a “look at me!” showiness, delivering a neologism on almost every page. He loves acronyms that seem designed to grab easy laughs from a live audience: we live in a TGIF world (Twitter, Google, Instagram, and Facebook) that demands EPIC preaching (experiential, participatory, imagistic, and christological).

Sometimes the inventions pile up: “The art of imagery is



what makes narraphors memorable.” It gets worse: “Transduction or transincarnation is the mind-bending, heartrending, body-spending language of MRI [missional, relational, incarnational] faith.” Such declarations invite not so much refutation as a roll of the eyes.

Cheesiness aside, Sweet has a habit of offering false, binary logic: Did Jesus die to give us points and propositions or to restore us to covenant relationship with God? This is the sort of argumentation used by someone not accustomed to being challenged.

But Sweet turned me into a fan by the end with nuts-and-bolts wisdom, which I first noticed in the questions at the end of chapters. I usually regard these questions as something editors force upon authors, without offering much payoff to the reader. But Sweet’s questions are meaty and patient, and they left me thinking. His readings of scripture are rich and suggestive and left me wanting to go and read likewise.

The book includes a patient, beautiful exposition of the story of the beheading of John the Baptist, of all things. Sweet elsewhere uses Walter Benjamin to summarize the two sorts of stories in scripture—stories of putting down roots and stories of taking wing. He insists, rightly, that we have to defamiliarize the familiar in preaching (his own nifty example: the word *billion* is cheap nowadays, but a billion days ago there was no critter walking on two feet on planet Earth). He lyrically unfolds the sacramental nature of all created reality and charges preachers to “sear” the identity of Christ onto the souls of listeners. And one line that will draw unanimous amens: the last person to wax lyrical on the goodness of human nature is a pastor’s spouse.

I suspect that Sweet’s cheesiness is intentional. He takes a jab at seminaries for lauding cold reason while denouncing

emotion as manipulative. In other words, he’s going to be passionate even if everybody else accuses him of excess. He’s at least having fun, and he implicitly invites us all to join in—in our own way. Sweet has a charming habit of referring to other preachers in honorific terms (X is “the Hildegard of homiletics,” Y is “the Rachmaninoff of preaching”). Sweet strikes me as the Jim Carrey of preaching—a lot of slapstick, and occasionally grating, but someone who can break through to real depths if you hang with him.

Princeton Theological Seminary has a large department of practical theology, which produces lots of scholarship and many graduate students. Two products of this department are Patrick Johnson and Michael Brothers.

Johnson is a parish preacher in a small, thriving church in New Jersey. His dissertation is a running engagement with three works that also had their origin at PTS: Tom Long’s *The Witness of Preaching*, and dissertations by Anna Carter Florence, now professor at Columbia Theological Seminary,

## Johnson helps me imagine the world more theologically.

and David Lose, now president of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

Johnson seeks to build on Darrell Guder’s theology by asking what a genuinely missional homiletic would look like. Folks often misunderstand *missional* as referring to a narrow field—the history or practice of what used to be called foreign missions. Guder’s Barthianism runs deeper. He sees mission as rooted in the sendings within the Trinity—the Father sends the Son, together they send the Spirit, and God so understood constantly sends the church.

Some readings of Karl Barth suggest that he was tragically uninterested in the Holy Spirit and the church, but for Guder Barth’s genius lies precisely in his focus on the Spirit and on the church as mission. Johnson wonders what difference it makes for preaching.

The answer lies in a patient and loving unpacking of one “paragraph” (running hundreds of pages) in Barth’s *Dogmatics*, which declares that the world is first the sphere of God’s providence. It is also a sphere of human confusion, where we contort God’s goodness to our own selfish ends. Preaching in such a setting won’t be done by a single figure from the clerical caste set above others. It will be done by a community of preachers, some ordained and some lay (Johnson has an almost Quaker vision of equality). And it will equip people for mission in the world.

Johnson helps me imagine the world more theologically, and he’s surely right that the church’s mission is to energize the whole body to discern its work in God’s world and to contextualize the gospel in our neighborhood. Yet I found myself wondering what this looks like with flesh on. How does Johnson’s own church live this out? Dissertations in practical theology often ignore such practical questions. I bet there are fruitful answers in Johnson’s own practice.

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## Sparrows

I never learned to tell one from another—  
swamp, field, song, vesper—they’re all scraps  
of drab: rust, dun, buff, tan. Some streaky-breasted,  
some not. We hear the flutter of their wings, look up,  
then yawn, ho hum, a sparrow. No rush for the binoculars.  
Like the poor, they are always with us. Look at them  
flick and flit in this dry meadow of foxtail, switchgrass,  
goldenrod; every leaf, stem, and seed head burnished  
in the dying light. Maybe they are the only angels  
we get in this life. But the very hairs on our head  
are numbered, and the father knows them all by name.  
Each sparrow, too, has a song—no flashy cardinal  
selling cheer, no sky-blue jay’s ironic squawk,  
no eponymous chicka-dee-dee-dee. Just us,  
the unnoticed, gleaning what others have left behind,  
and singing for all we’re worth, teetering on a bit  
of bracken at the edge of a wild field.

Barbara Crooker



Michael Brothers takes up a gauntlet laid down by Charles Campbell and other postliberal theologians inspired by the so-called Yale school, who draw on Erich Auerbach's description of the "tyrannical" nature of the Bible's claim on us. The Bible, they say, "absorbs" us such that we become "participants" in its story.

Brothers doesn't like this approach. He is troubled that Campbell offers so little theological reflection on the manner of presentation, and he thinks there should be more "distance" (hence his book title) between the claims of the text and the listening congregation. He uses various performance theories taken from the world of theater to make his case, and he defends the great Fred Craddock against Campbell's approach.

Craddock thought the problem in preaching is that everybody knows the basics of the gospel and is bored with it. So the trick of preaching is to approach the text indirectly, hoping to lure the congregation into making the right conclusions for itself. "Induction," it's called, and it fired distinguished careers like Barbara Brown Taylor's. It's a storyteller's approach to scripture, and in Craddock's hands it's beautiful. The strength in this book is the way it passes on some gems from Craddock.


Critiquing Campbell seems more appropriate for a book review than a whole book. And it's hard to find much that's

positive about "distancing" in scripture. We have a God who has come close, called us friends, made us God's body. How do we then preach?

Ellsworth Kalas reflects on this question out of a lifetime of preaching. He is especially interested in preaching in an age of distraction, and he tries to jujitsu some grace out of the challenge. Parishioners who consult scripture using their handheld devices may be really checking on texts, he says. Distraction can lead to inattentiveness, but it can also lead to genius. Sure, people may be less familiar with scripture and doctrine—but that means preachers have fresh material.

I love Kalas's biblical asides. He suggests that Moses saw the burning bush because he was willing to "turn aside" and look. Ezekiel, before he says anything, sits where his people sit, and so should preachers. Preachers should be as excited about scripture as an entomologist is about a new beetle. The task of preachers is to keep the memory of Eden alive.

Some common themes emerge from these different books. Several authors want to dethrone the place of the solo star preacher and make the preaching task more communal. Several want to retrieve an image for preaching, such as blood. All see the point of preaching as increasing the church's faithfulness rather than the preacher's ego or the church's size. And all insist that preaching should be a delight, and that it is never reducible to mere technique.





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# Faith MATTERS

by Samuel Wells

## Walking toward the storm

IN MARCH 1990 the European rugby union championship lay in the balance. Scotland and England had both won all their matches, and England traveled to Edinburgh knowing that the winner would take the coveted Grand Slam. The game was perhaps the finest in Scottish rugby history. But the defining moment came before it started. The England players ran onto the field to a largely hostile reception, but the Scots' captain David Sole did something different. He led his team out at a stately walking pace. It was an iconic moment. It said, "There's nothing you can throw at us we can't deal with. We're going to win this game, and we're going to walk right toward you, and we will not be overcome." And that's what happened. England threw everything at Scotland, but to no avail. And David Sole's walk became part of Scottish folklore.

Get into David Sole's mind for a moment. *This is the defining moment of my life, in my nation's cultural life. What happens in the next two hours will be my identity, my legacy, my single truth. And I'm walking slowly toward it. I'm entering the eye of the storm.*

Perhaps you are facing a storm. Your life, or the joy in your life, or the well-being of someone you treasure, seems to hang by a thread. Your instinct is to dodge, escape, deny, dive for cover, find a way out, run away. Everything is telling you to close your eyes and wait for it to go away, let it sort itself out, to go to sleep and discover it was all a bad dream, or to invite a fairy godmother to wish this moment away.

Could it be that God is calling you gently and quietly, not to deny, flee, or distract yourself but to walk toward the eye of the storm? Of course some dramas are best avoided; some wounds are not things to dwell on. But I believe that for each one of us there's a David Sole moment, a defining storm in which everything we are and are called to be comes together in a moment we can't avoid or deny.

Let's take an inventory of what walking toward the storm would mean.

It would mean going into your bottomless fear, naming it, facing the worst thing that could happen, feeling the impact of that thing, and then trusting that God will meet you so that you go through and beyond your fear and out the other side. That's courage. Trembling courage.

It would mean facing up to the unspeakable waste, the dream of what your life was supposed to be, the template for what you thought God had in store for you, the good things you thought you were entitled to hope for—the goals,

prospects, and options—and instead focusing on this thing you're walking toward as perhaps the only thing God wants you to concentrate on right now, and believing that God will look after the rest. That's trust. Quavering trust.

It would mean entering into the convulsing grief, loss, fear of separation, of isolation, of not mattering any more, of being snuffed out like a candle, of it seeming as if you'd never been, of having no meaning to your life except what God makes for you, and believing that that's all that counts. That's faith. Shuddering faith.

It would mean accepting the prospect of harrowing pain of uncertain duration, unpredictable depth, and relentless intensity with no protection except the everlasting arms, and believing those arms will never let you go. That's hope. Quaking hope.

Fear, waste, grief, pain. That's what it means to walk toward the storm. Courage, trust, faith, hope. That's what we look for in the defining moments of our lives.

This isn't the way our culture teaches us to address the storm. Our culture teaches us to fix the problem and, if we can't fix the problem, to learn better techniques, apply stronger systems, use more advanced technology. Our culture has nothing to tell us about a storm we can't control—it tries to manage storms so as to make virtues like courage, trust, faith, and hope unnecessary.

But maybe that's precisely what you're facing today. A storm you can't control. A storm that's coming right toward you.

The Christian faith is that God in Christ walked toward the eye of the storm. Jesus didn't deny, avoid, or escape Jerusalem. Jesus took up his cross and walked toward Golgotha, beyond trembling fear, in spite of criminal waste, amidst echoing grief, embodying terrible pain. Jesus walked slowly, purposefully, intentionally into the eye of the storm, because only through the storm would he find what he was truly looking for.

What he was looking for was us. He kept his eyes on the prize—and the prize was us.

That's why we walk toward the storm—in trust, in resolution, in hope. God's walking toward the storm too—from the other side. There's no fantasy or denial or escape in God. God knows that the way to us lies via the cross. So we walk into the eye of the storm for one reason only. To meet God.

---

*Samuel Wells is the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London.*



# IN Review

## Cancer and good news

by Deanna A. Thompson

When I returned to teaching theology to undergraduates after being diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer, I intended to say something about my condition on the first day of class. But I was still weak from radiation and from back surgery to repair two broken vertebrae, and on that first day I was focused on not falling over in front of the classroom. Words about cancer's invasion of my body remained at bay.

By midsemester there still had been no mention of cancer. Then the first day of talking about theodicy arrived. Students generated a list of ways people try to fit together the puzzle of God's relationship to human suffering, then the room grew quietly attentive. These young people wanted to delve more deeply into how Christians attempt to answer questions about why awful things happen to beautiful people, and where God might be in the midst of it all.

Into this space I carried my story of being diagnosed with advanced-stage cancer at 42, of almost dying, of the lousy prognosis—and together we made various theological attempts to find answers bearing on that experience. It was a tough class, but a transformative one. I've long followed Parker Palmer's guidance about self-disclosure in teaching: use it to serve the wider truth. But it took time and courage to offer up this aspect of my life as a case study for God's relationship to suffering.

I'm in my sixth year of living with cancer, and I continue to bring my cancer story with me to class when we talk of theodicy. If I want students to understand how theology matters, they need to see real-life examples of how it does. That's why I'm also turning less to tradi-

tional theological textbooks and more to the burgeoning genre of theo-memoir. For my students, who are increasingly unfamiliar with even the most basic theological vocabulary, serious theology that is woven through engaging personal stories—as in Nadia Bolz-Weber's *Pastrix*—draws them in and creates new lenses for interpreting the world.

One of the most compelling recent additions to the genre of theo-memoir is J. Todd Billings's *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ*. In it this gifted Reformed theologian and married father of two young children graciously, gracefully weaves his struggles with being diagnosed with a rare form of blood cancer at 39 together with probing biblical and theological reflection. He chronicles the terrible interruption that cancer brings into his life, as well as the deep pain—physical, emotional, and spiritual—that comes with treatment, prognosis, and radical alterations to his life. But Billings is clear from the very first page that the point of writing about life with cancer is not simply to share his own struggles. Rather, he intertwines his experiences of living with incurable cancer “with the exploration of a much weightier story—the story of God's saving action in and through Jesus Christ.”

So that he can tell the much weightier story of God's saving love, Billings rarely lingers over the difficult details of his own grave situation. He chronicles his illness just enough to give us a sense of how awful it is, and then we witness his impressive theological commitment to situate his story within the much larger divine story.

Key to this larger story for Billings is how all aspects of human life are experi-

enced inside the greater drama of God's love for creation. It doesn't take long for readers to perceive not only that Billings is a skilled exegete, but also that his way of seeing the world is much like that of his theological ancestor John Calvin. Like Calvin, Billings uses scripture as a lens of faith to focus and sharpen his reading of life.

Though Billings's personal and theological reflections are saturated with scriptural references from all parts of the Bible, he devotes special attention to the Psalms, which, he writes, “bring our whole life before God . . . and focus our eyes on God's promises.” He makes a very important observation about how the Psalms tend to be used in Christian communities: they help us rejoice and they help us petition God when things get tough, but too rarely are we taught or encouraged to use Psalms for purposes of lament. Yet it is precisely the lament Psalms that open space for the “pain, confusion, and anger” we experience at life's worst moments. Jesus cried out on the cross using a Psalm of lament. As Billings declares: “Both the psalmist and Jesus show us that it is not irreligious to cry out in pain and grief before God.” Lament is an act of faith, and the lament Psalms offer us words with which to cry

REJOICING  
in  
LAMENT



*Wrestling with Incurable  
Cancer • Life in Christ*

J. TODD BILLINGS

### Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ

By J. Todd Billings

Brazos, 224 pp., \$18.99 paperback

Deanna A. Thompson teaches religion at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, and is author of *Hoping for More: Having Cancer, Talking Faith, and Accepting Grace* (Cascade).



out to God when we have no words of our own. Billings's defense of lament is made all the more powerful by his description of how lament shapes his own prayer life.

Although Billings holds to a Reformed view of God's providence (à la the Westminster Shorter Catechism), his life with cancer compels him to articulate a personal and poignant take on God's preservation and governance of creation. In response to claims that his cancer is "part of God's perfect plan," Billings explains how providence differs from monocausality, in which God is seen as directly responsible for everything that happens in the world. Scripture clearly demonstrates that "God is not the sole actor in the world," so Billings is frustrated with prayers that ask for complete healing for him. Even though he believes that God is capable of acting outside of ordinary processes, he is well aware of the incurable status of his cancer. Billings counsels those who pray for him to pray for prolonged remission, for God to work in, with, and through the treatment he's receiving.

Living with lament as Billings does opens theological space where many of us who struggle to discern God's whereabouts amid a cancer diagnosis or other awful experience will find room for our own doubts, grief, anger, and hope. Billings also captures well the immense challenge of talking about faith in the toughest of times. Some people say regarding his diagnosis, "God's will is perfect," and he admits that such statements "seem to minimize my actual pain." He confesses that sometimes he gets tired of hoping. When friends say they admire his faith, he's not sure what this means. He wonders, "Do I deserve credit for my faith?" Answering his own question in the negative, he turns our attention again to the larger story about a God who loves and cares for him, cancer and all, and for all of creation.

Billings is resolute in his insistence that the Bible does not offer a tidy response to the problem of evil, but his trust in God's providence over all of life—the good and the evil, the beautiful and the tragic, good health and disease—never waivers. A big point for him is that throughout the Psalms lament is voiced

in the context of God's *hesed*—faithful loving-kindness. Although he rejects the suggestion that God actively causes cancer, Billings believes that God permits cancer, even as God's permissive will is grounded in love. But why? Why cancer? Why should anyone be cut down in the prime of life? We don't know. Billings wrestles in an anguished, elegant way with these questions, and in the end, he takes great comfort in the conviction that God remains sovereign over all.

Billings's courageous theo-memoir teaches us not only about living realistically and hopefully in the face of an incurable disease, but also about a contemporary theology of providence wide and deep enough to hold serious grief, anguish, hope, and trust. He mounts critiques against approaches like open theism and Moltmann's trinitarian theology of suffering so as to preserve divine impassibility, in which "suffering and dying are not internal to the life of God."

When I bring my own experiences of living with cancer together with questions about God's relationship to suffering, I tend to linger with the questions a bit longer than Billings does. While it's important to emphasize that most Psalms of lament end with trust in God's *hesed*, there's still Psalm 88, where no resolution exists—where questions are left unanswered. Just as we need more space for lament, my students and I talk about the need for theodicies that move a bit more slowly toward resolution, that make more space for the "Why?"

Billings and I hold somewhat different theological commitments, but this does not detract from my deep gratitude for the gift of his theo-memoir. It required great courage to write, and it will leave any reader transformed.

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## A Philosophical Walking Tour with C. S. Lewis: Why It Did Not Include Rome

By Stewart Goetz

Bloomsbury, 208 pp., \$29.95 paperback

Why didn't C. S. Lewis's religious journey end in Rome? Stewart Goetz suggests that the answer involves a theoretical quarrel with Thomas Aquinas about pleasure and the soul. It is a provocative thesis, carefully argued, but I am puzzled about why the ordinary reader of Lewis would be worried about the road not taken. On the other hand, the question does strike me as one that some Roman Catholics might ask. Catholicism often presents itself as a sort of theological geometry: no matter where you enter the system, the whole structure of practice and dogma follows with deductive finality. This theological geometry requires that if Lewis espouses Christianity at all, the Catholic system will follow necessarily.

Lewis experienced Catholic systematization at Oxford in the form of a version of neoscholasticism at the Dominican priory of Blackfriars. According to the evidence in Goetz's account, he found Catholic necessitarianism quite uncongenial (as I do, even though I am a Roman Catholic). He wrote to one correspondent: "I repudiate their practice of defining and systematizing and continually enumerating a list of things that must be accepted." Deductive Catholicism led to what Lewis called add-ons: doctrines such as the Assumption of Mary to which there is little or no reference in biblical

testimony. His most influential book was titled *Mere Christianity* for good reason.

Goetz puts great store in Lewis's commitment to common sense, which would mark a sharp difference between mere Christianity and the metaphysical complexities of Aquinas's *Summa*. Lewis regarded the church's official promotion of Aquinas as just another Catholic add-on. He claimed that it is common sense that all pleasure is essentially, intrinsically good. But aren't there bad, illicit, or sinful pleasures? Lewis thinks not. An act may be sinful, but the pleasure it elicits is simply pleasure, and pleasures are what we go for. Fornication is wrong, but sexual pleasure, like all pleasure, is good. Lewis held that the essential good of pleasure and the essential evil of pain are part of the Christian doctrines of heaven (a place of infinite pleasure) and hell (a place of infinite pain).

There is a commonsense ring to the notion that pleasure is an intrinsic good. However, *pleasure* is one of the trickiest words in our moral vocabulary. If one looks at its common usage, Lewis's common sense does not appear all that common. Gilbert Ryle, an "ordinary language" philosopher, points out that "we all know how to conduct our every day . . . business with the verbs like 'enjoy,' 'dislike,' 'hurt'; and yet we don't know how to conduct our business with such abstract nouns as 'pleasure,' 'aversion,' and 'pain.'" Lewis's dichotomy of pleasure and pain is not simple common sense; instead it seems to be a broad theory of human motivation like Jeremy Bentham's hedonistic calculus. Pleasure and pain are correlated opposites like hot and cold—thus the clear

distinction between heaven (pleasure) and hell (pain). In ordinary language usage, however, *pleasure* and *pain* do not behave as opposites. To take just one instance: pain language is often specific to place and time, but pleasure language is not. Where does it hurt? we ask. How long did the pain last? But we seldom ask where the pleasure is or how long it lasted.

For Lewis, pleasure and pain explain our conduct. Actions are instrumental for achieving an intrinsic good; they are the means to the end of acquiring pleasure or avoiding pain. Goetz sums up Lewis's position: "If knowledge, music, and beauty are good, . . . they are so only because they are instrumental to pleasure." But the problem with any instrumental theory of action is the relation between means and ends. Is the relation external or internal? If the instrument is external, then any means will do if it achieves the end. I may get the same sexual pleasure licitly or illicitly. On the other hand, if the means-ends relation is internal, then the pleasure is embedded in the means. I love Mahler's ninth symphony, but it's awfully long. I wish that I could get the pleasure without the tedium of listening.

Recognizing the internal or external relation of means and ends is critical to understanding Lewis's presumed conflict with Aquinas. Like Lewis, Aquinas viewed pleasure as an intrinsic good in the sense that it is not instrumental to some further good. However, he did not think that pleasure as a generic category can be the payoff for actions. The pleasure of moral good is internal to the action. Illicit sex yields bad pleasure. The basic reason for Aquinas's objection is that the good life consists in activity: in putting to use the moral, artistic, and intellectual skills that are under our control. The good life aims at happiness, at activity that is in accordance with the virtues. If the virtues pay off in pleasure beyond the pleasure of being virtuous, that is good luck—or a gift of the gods.

Common sense may help support Lewis's view of pleasure, but it seems an unlikely approach to a discussion of the soul. Goetz argues that Lewis is a



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Reviewed by Dennis O'Brien, author of *The Church and Abortion: A Catholic Dissent* (Rowman & Littlefield), who lives in Middlebury, Vermont.

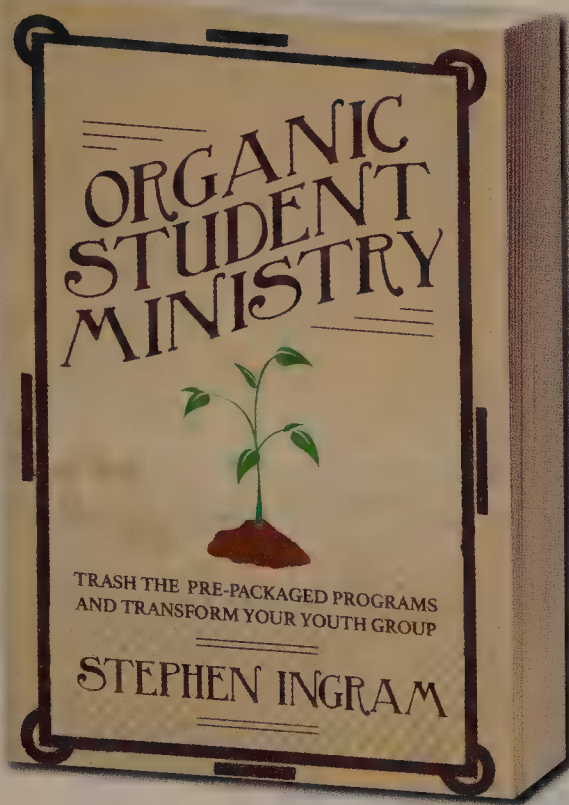


Cartesian, holding that there is a clear separation between the external body and the inner soul or person. Aquinas denied such a separation. For him, the soul is the proper activity of the biological body. The question of body and soul has a history going back to Plato, and it has been an obsession in philosophy from Descartes to the latest controversy over artificial intelligence. Goetz's account of the presumed argument between Lewis and Aquinas illustrates the paradoxes and problems of a very thorny issue.

The quarrel between Lewis and Aquinas over the soul could be regarded as a contest between common Christian language and common sense. It is very common for Christians to talk about the soul as if it were a separate entity. It is the soul that God judges, and it is the soul that is reunited with body at the general resurrection. On the other hand, common sense sounds more like Aquinas: the soul is just the body alive. Lewis's and Aquinas's differing views on the soul/body distinction emerge sharply in the Christian problem

of the resurrection body. Goetz offers an extended discussion of that conundrum.

The various conflicts between Lewis and Aquinas suggested by Goetz are intrinsically interesting. Evaluating them as a philosopher, I would have to give Aquinas the nod. At the same time, I don't think such a judgment would be fair to Lewis. Lewis was well trained in formal philosophy. He read philosophy as an undergraduate, and his first academic position at Oxford was in philosophy. For all that, he did not write philosophically. His best works are sermons: exercises in Christian rhetoric full of illuminating metaphors and narratives to energize the faith. There is common sense to pleasure as an intrinsic good if you mean to deny gloomy Christian asceticism. Heaven as infinite pleasure sounds attractive. If one finally gives the palm to Lewis over Aquinas, one might adapt the words of Petrarch about Aristotle: "[Aquinas] teaches what virtue is, I do not deny that, but [unlike Lewis] his lesson lacks words that sting and set fire and urge toward love of virtue and hatred of vice."



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## Between Magisterium and Marketplace: A Constructive Account of Theology and the Church

By Robert C. Saler  
Fortress, 192 pp., \$49.00 paperback

When the Catholic Church's Extraordinary Synod on the Family convened last year to discuss theologically fraught issues from divorce and cohabitation to homosexuality, an unusually public debate swirled around it. What is theological truth, people asked, and where does the authority reside to define it? In an essay called "Why I Am a Catholic," *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat argued that the "search for authority in Christianity" began with the need to know what had been taught by Jesus and the apostles, rather than with "pre-emptive submission to an established hierarchy."

It's a chicken-and-egg theological question: Is there a Christian truth that is prior and external to the teaching ministry that proclaims it? By briefly suggesting a shift in doctrine supported by impeccably magisterial teaching authority, the Synod on the Family brought that question to the fore.

In making his own case for doctrinal and disciplinary stability in the area of divorce, Douthat distinguished himself from a considerable body of fellow converts, mostly from Anglican and Lutheran churches, whose explanations suggest a search for authority expressed by an established hierarchy. These authors, including Paul Griffiths, R. R. Reno, Reinhard Hütter, and Leonard Klein, collectively suggest by their conversions that a crisis is afoot in the world of confessional, theologically catholic Protestantism.

This crisis is not strictly an illusion, Lutheran theologian Robert Saler suggests in *Between Magisterium and Marketplace: A Constructive Account of*

*Theology and the Church*. The relationship between how we conceive of theological authorship and how we conceive of the church—Saler's two main concerns—is particularly unsettled. Theological authorship is increasingly authorized by the norms of academic publishing and hiring or by the marketplace writ large, rather than by the norms of a distinct and identifiable church. It is this new marketplace that creates the profusion of theologies inflected by race, gender, and ethnicity, as well as their libidinous cultural cognates, which so many of these recent converts from Protestantism have found offensive. Saler summarizes the alternative expressed by these writers as "high-magisterial polis ecclesiology," which seeks to locate authentic theology in a "concrete, visible, unified and magisterially underpinned" public, namely the church. In this understanding the church

Reviewed by Benjamin J. Dueholm, pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in Wauconda, Illinois.

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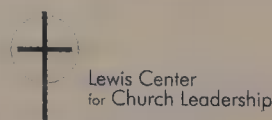
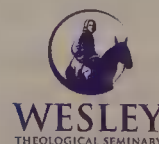


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can, with its own norms, resist the corrosive power of the anarchic marketplace.

Saler finds the contemporary authorial problem foreshadowed in the works of two pairs of theological writers: Thomas More and William Tyndale during the Reformation, and John Henry Newman and Friedrich Schleiermacher in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The debates—literal and violent in the case of More and Tyndale, figurative and conflated in the case of Newman and Schleiermacher—are at once distant and familiar. With More and Newman we see painfully tautological arguments from authority; with Tyndale and Schleiermacher, conceptions of theological virtuosity that threaten to escape any norm whatsoever.

It is the latter threat, of an unbounded and market-driven theological authorship, that drives polis ecclesiology toward Newmannesque conclusions. In this view, as Saler puts it, “ecclesiology precedes epistemology”: an a priori commitment

to a concrete and visible public, including its hierarchically constituted teaching authority, shapes all theological speech and guards it from the disintegration of the marketplace and the cultural liberalism of the mainline churches. Even Radical Orthodoxy, as proposed by theologians like Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, requires a certain heroic individualism to survive and thus can’t satisfy

the need for authority expressed in the high-magisterial view.

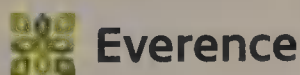
But is an ecclesially diverse and fragmented landscape of theological authorship necessarily a bad thing? Are the theologies coming out of African, Latin American, Asian, feminist, LGBT, and other contexts really a sort of philosophical shopping spree, as polis ecclesiologists from Hütter to Joseph Ratzinger



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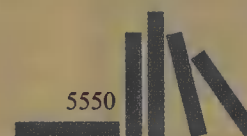
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seem to indicate? Is a concrete, visible, continuous, and magisterially governed body the only way church can be reliably discerned in the world?

In his last chapter Saler proposes an alternative to the church as polis that he calls "church as diffusively spatialized event." Drawing on the work of Vitor Westhelle and Joseph Sittler, Saler describes the church not as the exclusive home of the Spirit's working or as the space of redemption, but as an ongoing and creative response to ecological and cultural realities it cannot fully circumscribe. He writes:

If the catholicity of redemption is a present and not simply a future reality, then we must be prepared to find the church outside of those spaces which label themselves as "church," and we must be prepared to see redemption in events that are just as likely to disrupt as to affirm the status quo of both religion and society.

For that purpose, a "weak" and diffuse church is a help and not a hindrance. A theological authorship that extends God's "otherness" to humans who occupy "very different discursive contexts . . . from those of a given theological author" can grasp truths in a profusion that is unintelligible to a more centralized ecclesiology.

A wide and powerful erudition makes this book dense and sometimes breathless reading. It was tempting to imagine a more leisurely and panoramic itinerary, from the death-of-the-author theory of Roland Barthes to the expressionist ecclesiology of Karl Barth. This dialogue between literary theory and theology is more than welcome, but by the end the book seems to be more about ecclesiology and theology than about authorship. Yet even on those terms, Saler's book does something desperately needed: it makes a positive case for the role of theological and ecclesial pluralism. Theological authorship inescapably implies a conception of church, and although some of us may wish to avoid choosing between conceptions of church as starkly distinct as polis and event, there may prove to be no third way.

## BookMarks

### Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat

By Gordon Oyer

Cascade Books, 298 pp., \$33.00

In November 1964, Thomas Merton hosted an unprecedented ecumenical gathering of 13 peace authors and activists—including Catholics Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Mennonite John Howard Yoder, and Quaker A. J. Muste—at the Abbey of Gethsemani, in Kentucky. The purpose was to explore the theological warrants or spiritual roots for protest and public witness—especially against the increasing violence of modern technological society. Oyer's narration raises a number of tantalizing questions: What if the abbey had had female housing, which would have allowed the attendance of Dorothy Day? What if Martin Luther King Jr.'s acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize had not prohibited the possibility of inviting him to attend? What if the event had been planned as a more formal meeting with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, as organizer John Heidbrink had proposed? And, perhaps most significantly, why did the retreat fail to galvanize a united protest effort among participants in the years that followed?

### The Spirit of Grace: A Guide for Study and Devotion

By Alister E. McGrath

Westminster John Knox, 128 pp.,

\$16.00 paperback

In this fourth book in the Heart of Christian Faith series, McGrath covers the part of the creed dealing with the Holy Spirit and the church. With great lucidity, McGrath writes about human nature and grace. Trained in both natural science and theology, he is adept at challenging reductionist views of human nature and engaging the New Atheists. McGrath draws on a variety of sources with an ecumenical spirit, but he has an Augustinian-Reformed perspective.



# ON Media

## Religious satire on Broadway

**G**od is the new star on Broadway. In two recent plays, David Javerbaum's *An Act of God* and Robert Askins's *Hand to God*, God clearly has something to say. But what is it?

In a first for a Broadway play, *An Act of God* started as the Twitter account @TweetsofGod. Tweeter David Javerbaum personifies God as a cranky omniscient father frustrated by the irresponsible behavior of his children. The tweets are mostly funny, in a cheeky and politically left way. ("I know I should stop appearing in Republicans' dreams and saying 'I command thee to run for President!' but dammit, it's so friggin' fun.") They are sometimes theologically provocative: "If you think atheism promotes a lack of moral responsibility, you should see what happens when my son takes the blame for all your sins." Each tweet nails the genre: a momentary insight or a witty joke—and then done.

As a Broadway play the joke stretches thin. God appears in human form, with Jim Parsons playing more or less the same character he plays in *The Big Bang Theory*, but now possessed by the Deity. He delivers the tweets amidst interspersed exposition. Javerbaum has more time to kill with the play, but adds no richness or complexity. Islam is dispatched with a witty one-liner; Jesus is a plot device advancing the not-so-subtle message of the play. And that is this: God is a screwed-up narcissist who gets off on playing high-stakes games with his creation. The play is not much more sophisticated than a freshman essay in a philosophy of religion class. Its God is a reductive caricature that anyone with exposure to Judaism, Islam, or Christianity will recognize.

While *An Act of God* falls flat because it isn't at home with the genre of stage drama, *Hand to God* is so at home in the genre that it can afford to cut loose. Most of the play unfolds in a

Lutheran church somewhere in the U.S. South. The hand referred to in the title belongs to a teenage boy named Jason who may or may not be possessed by the devil in the form of a sock puppet, Tyrone. Where Jason is mild, polite, and subservient to a fault, Tyrone is sex-crazed, foul-mouthed, and violent. No one, not even Jason, knows whether Tyrone is the manifestation of Jason's dark side or something even darker. The play skirts this question and focuses instead on the human dramas unfolding among the churchpeople who confront Tyrone and end up facing their own demons of grief, loneliness, frustration, and miscommunication.

Askins understands religion's power to give shape and meaning to life in the midst of confusion and despair, and he understands religion's human dimensions.

*Hand to God* is uproariously, filthily, and darkly hilarious and thrives on beautiful stagecraft and excellent writing. As it turns out, sock puppets make very convincing theater (at least when played by talented actor Steven Moyer). At the beginning and end of the play, however, Askins can't resist offering his armchair anthropology about the origins of religion in a monologue delivered by Tyrone. While it's a superior play to *An Act of God* in every way, *Hand to God*'s theology is no better. Watching it is like reading a history of human religion written by a high school student who's read a little René Girard and just watched *The Exorcist*.

The two plays are united by a willingness to make fun of religion, to expose its (supposedly) base origins, and to mock the earnest humans trapped in their fumbling pre-Enlightenment belief system. Both plays take a page from *The Book of Mormon*, which demonstrated that people will pay (up to \$450) to see religion treated with irreverence, satire, and irony.

This style of humor is not new to American popular culture. The creators



PHOTO BY JEREMY DANIEL. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

**IRREVERENT SATIRE:** Jim Parsons in *An Act of God* portrays the Almighty as a witty crank.

of *The Book of Mormon* made it common fare in *South Park*. Lewis Black embodies it in every *Daily Show* appearance. *The Simpsons* alludes to it in the antagonism between Homer and Ned Flanders.

But the humor is new to Broadway, and that's worth paying attention to. With tickets averaging \$150, producers and theater companies are loath to take a risk on anything that might not sell. But these plays sell: what once was an edgy form of humor celebrated only by rebellious teens is now attracting ticket-buying adults.

The theologian in me winced at every reductive generalization. But laughter can also be a purgative. Since the Enlightenment we've asked ourselves, "What is religion, and what is it for?" Belief in God, which once seemed obvious, seems strange. Faith has become a burden to carry through the modern world, an irrational holdover from pre-modern times instead of part of the ordinary fabric of life.

Maybe that burden is being lifted by satire and irony. But what both plays miss is how a life of faith can weave a witness to justice, a commitment to beauty, and the joy of community into everyday life. Perhaps the gospel will get a better hearing in the silence after the laughter dies down.

The author is Kathryn Reklis, who teaches theology at Fordham University.



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by Carol Howard Merritt

# CHURCH in the MAKING

## Soup-kitchen church

The guests streamed into the soup kitchen of West End Collegiate Church, shaking off the bitter cold from New York City's winter. Many of them lived outside, so they were used to being rejected from public spaces like museums or churches. But the members of West End follow the Benedictine credo: "Welcome everyone as if you are welcoming Christ." So the weary men and women knew they could rest here. They shrugged off their backpacks and coats, and settled into their seats in anticipation of the Bible study held before the meal. It was Advent, so associate pastor Jes Kast-Keat lit the first two purple candles of the wreath. The smell of smoke rose and mingled with the food, and a guest called out, "Let's go to church today, pastor!"

Kast-Keat brightened. The guest had articulated a hope that had been forming within her. She'd been hearing other people echo her thought around tables, in their greetings, and as they said goodbye: "This is *my church*." Those declarations felt right, as if they were creating something by naming it. They could sense the sacred space in the soup kitchen. They had been gathering for worship.

Actually, this community had been coming together for hundreds of years. Historians believe that Comforters of the Sick, or *Ziekentroosters*, first conducted religious services for the small colony of New Netherland on Manhattan Is-

land. In 1628 an ordained minister arrived and began the Reformed Dutch Church in America. West End Collegiate is part of the Collegiate Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, and the oldest Protestant church with a continuing organization in America. There are four other Collegiate Churches of New York City: Marble, Middle, Fort Washington, and Intersections. West End, which was established as a center for the Dutch refugee and relief efforts, is now in an affluent neighborhood a couple blocks away from Central Park.

According to Kast-Keat, the location gives the members of West End Collegiate Church an opportunity. Kast-Keat asked, "How could those in homes get to know their neighbors, when the person who sleeps on the street is their neighbor?" In the 1980s, church members worked to answer that question. They took action by starting a soup kitchen and offering an optional Bible study.

When Kast-Keat learned that guests had often been rejected by churches, she wanted to make sure that they would have a long-term welcome at West End and a space to worship. So she structured an order of worship around the Bible study, giving participants more leadership and voice. The guests read the scriptures and led the prayers of the people.

Kast-Keat did not preach from a manuscript but invited conversation during the sermon. At the end of the service, everyone prayed the Lord's Prayer in unison.

These components invigorated the worship and unified the worshipers. "When people are in survival mode on the streets," said Kast-Keat, "there's something powerful about being able to say a prayer together." As the words reverberated from mouth to mouth, the congregants realized that they were not alone. Then they ate together, breaking bread with one another, and their connection deepened.

More people began attending the service, until the day when one guest named what was happening: church, a worshipping community separate and yet still connected to the larger congregation.

Kast-Keat has told the West End congregation what's happening, and its members are discerning what it means to have a church forming in their chapel. They're considering questions of polity and governance, like whether members should vote to serve communion, and working to rename the feeding program so that the name reflects the worshipping community. West End Collegiate has a creative spirit, and welcomes the opportunity

to try out new things. Members keep this spirit alive as they work through the trials, mistakes, and excitement of this possibility. "We don't have this all figured out," Kast-Keat said.

I asked her about having the worship service so closely related to the feeding program. Did it ever feel coercive? Did people worry that they had to worship so they could eat? Did they feel as if they needed to be Christian in order to receive food?

We'd both been aware of organizations that try to force God onto vulnerable populations. They proselytize the homeless, giving goods and services in exchange for conversion. But Kast-Keat assured me that West End does not force-feed God. Everyone is welcome around the table. West End makes sure that people can come to the table together regardless of their faith tradition or lack of tradition. The members indicate this through the music they play, through their greetings, and in their ongoing interactions with diners and worshipers.

"The colonial idea is ingrained in our culture," Kast-Keat said, and explained that West End is aware of its power. "But our job is not to bring God to the neighborhood. God is already there. We are bearing witness to God."

Carol Howard Merritt is author of *Tribal Church* and cohost of *God Complex Radio*. Her blog is hosted by the *CENTURY*.



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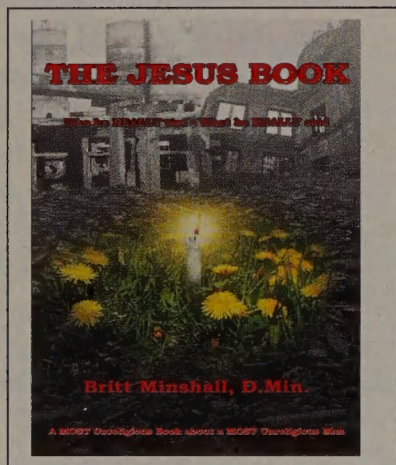
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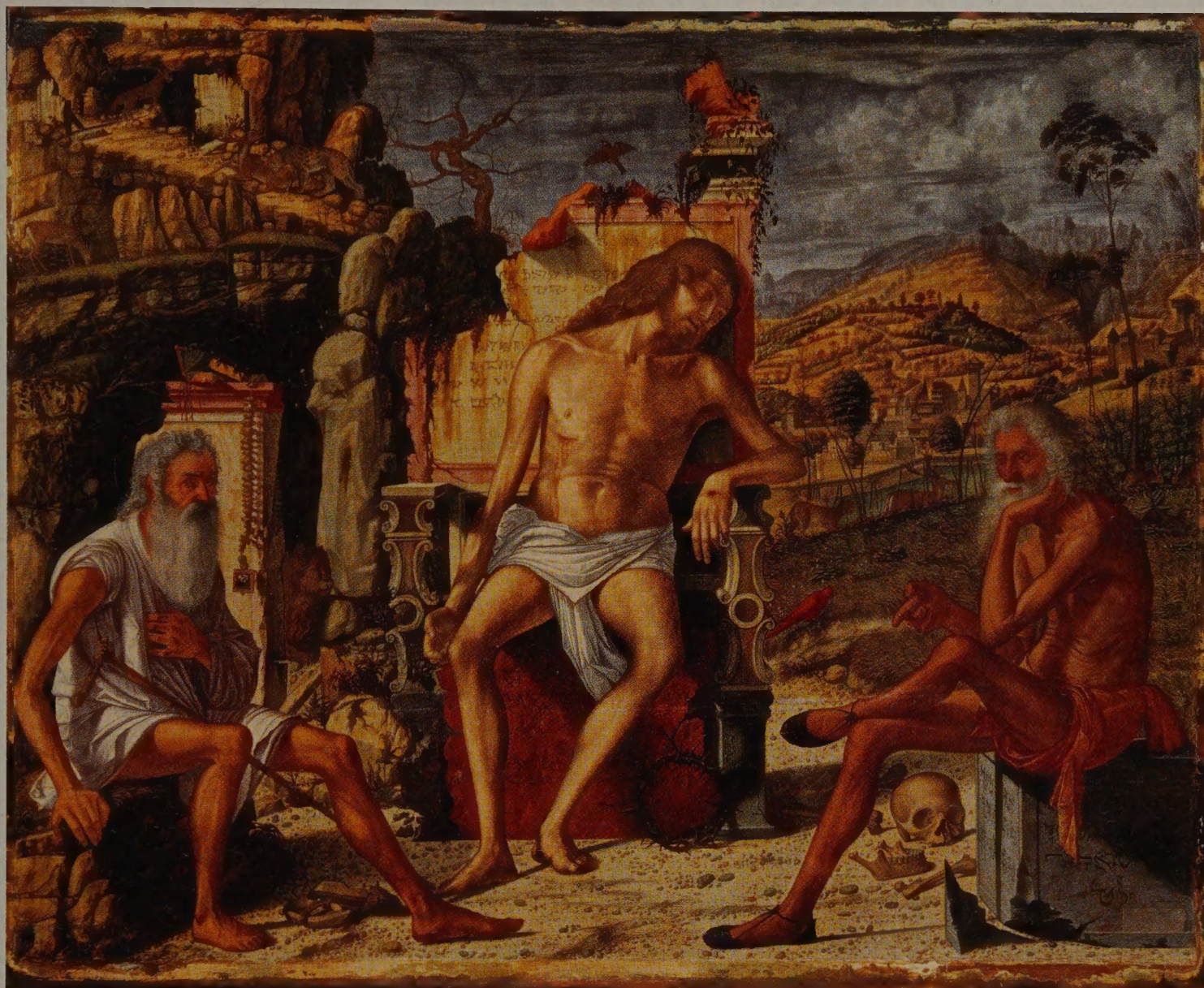
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*The Meditation on the Passion, by Vittore Carpaccio (ca. 1460–1525)*

The dead Christ sits between St. Jerome on his left and Job on his right. Christ appears to be sleeping—a reference to the resurrection. The skull and human bones near Job associate him with death and disease. Vittore Carpaccio, a Renaissance artist from Venice, pairs Job with Jerome, the great biblical scholar of the patristic period, who wrote that Job “prophesies the resurrection of men’s bodies at once with clearness and with more caution than anyone has yet shown.” “I know,” Job says, “that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth . . . and I shall see God” (Job 19:25). The Hebrew inscription “My redeemer lives 19” is legible on the marble slab on which Job sits. The inscription faces toward Jerome, who has influenced the Christian interpretation of Job as a paradigm of patience, a believer whose suffering compares with Christ’s, and a prophet who foretold Christ’s resurrection.

*Art selection and commentary by Heidi J. Hornik, who teaches in the art department at Baylor University, and Mikeal C. Parsons, who teaches in Baylor’s religion department.*



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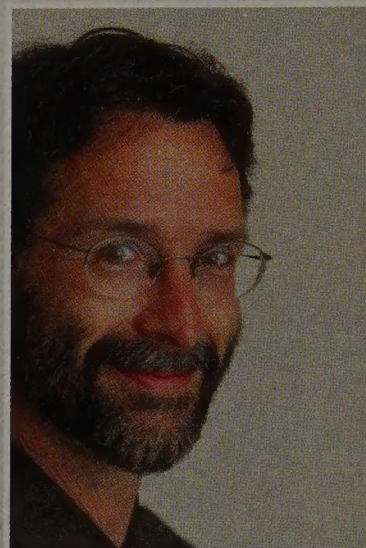


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## THINKING **SIDEWAYS**

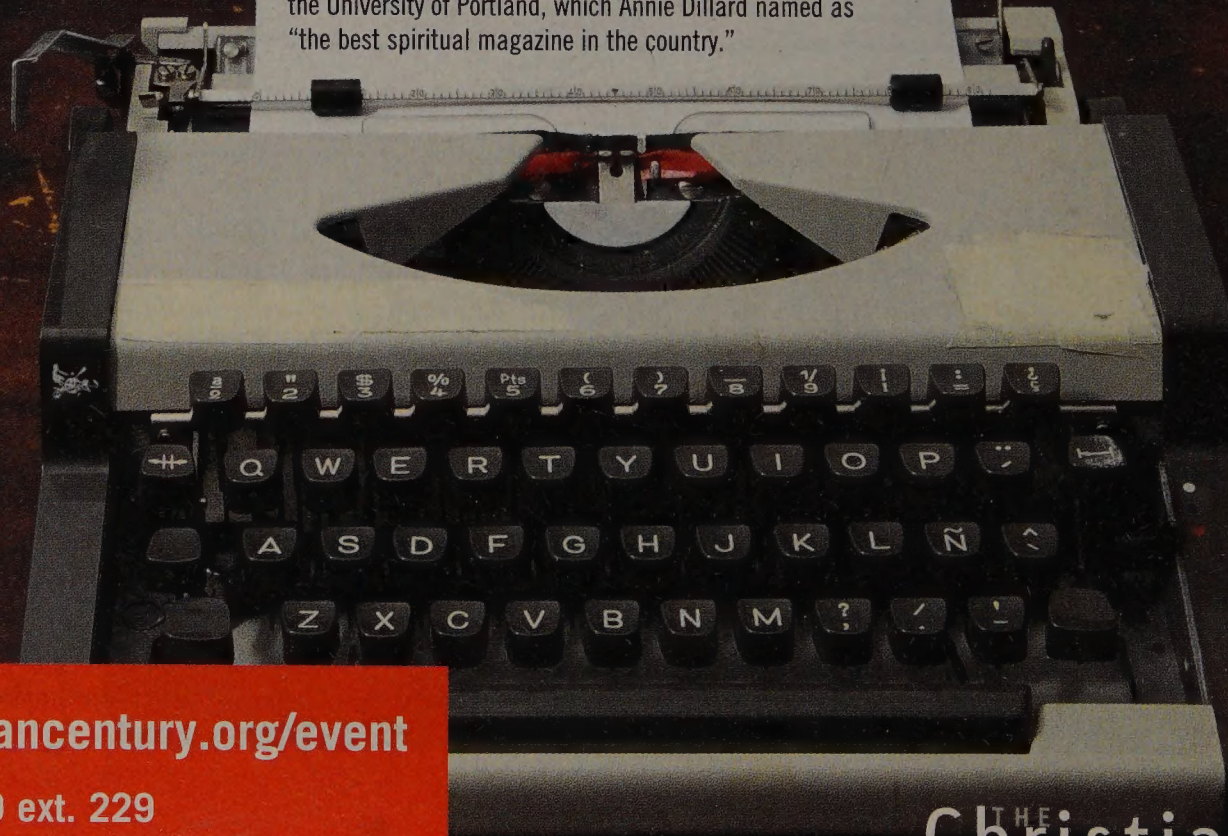
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